



A REVIEW OF THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF EARLY FEMALE MUSICOLOGISTS TO MUSIC-THEATRE IN NIGERIA

ABE, Adeolu PhD

Department of Theatre and Creative Arts
Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo

Email: abea@afued.edu.ng

Tel: +2348029903823

Abstract

Music-theatre is a developing genre of the performing arts in Nigeria. It is expressed in different forms and may be identified in various ways such as opera, music-drama, musical-theatre or musicals. In Nigeria, both the male and female gender have contributed to its development in diverse ways, little is known of the contributions of the female gender. This paper, through interview, historical and literature review, provides a general review of the contributions of selected female music scholars to the development of the genre in practice and knowledge. While there are a number of female music scholars, the paper established two outstanding female scholars as performers, composers and directors of the genre among Nigerian music scholars. The paper concludes that female scholars should build on the pioneering efforts by the two female scholars and expand the frontier of knowledge and practice of music-theatre in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigerian music-theatre, Female musicologists, Opera performance, Ethnomusicology, Performing arts history

Introduction

Nigerian art music is to a large extent male dominated in many areas of specialisations. This is shown in the number of genders (male and female) among musicologists in the various music departments within institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. Although, a number of female practicing musicologists are emerging, male dominance seems significant. Music-theatre or opera as one of the areas of art music in Nigeria is significantly limited in practice. The concepts, music-theatre, opera, music-drama, musical-theatre and 'musical' are similar and sometimes divergent. These terms will be interchangeably used in this paper. The impact of male gender is conspicuous as most operas composed in Nigeria are written by male composers as revealed by Omojola (1995), Ekweme (2008) and Abe (2023). The involvement of female musicologists in the operatic genre is limited in comparison with their male counterparts. Nevertheless, some female music scholars have made notable contributions in the male dominated genre of music. Their contributions have expanded music-theatre in practice, research and education in Nigeria, Africa and in global development. This paper therefore focuses on two female musicologists who have contributed immensely to the music-theatre genre, projecting their profiles and contributions to the genre of performing arts.

Female Musicologist in the Early Stages of Opera in Nigeria

It is important to stress that Opera stands out among the genres of music and theatre arts that have received attention in Nigeria. Opera, as a Western arts form combines music and drama, and it is presented with theatrical elements. It found its way to Nigeria during the colonial era as established by Omojola (1985). Its development thereafter expanded and evolved Nigerian forms. Abe (2021) established two broad types of opera in Nigeria, namely: the scored and unscored opera. While the former is formal with libretto and music score, the latter is informal without music score and a well written libretto. A remarkable factor in the development of scored opera in Nigeria was the establishment of music as a course of study in Nigeria's higher institutions. These institutions trained art music composers who fostered opera compositions and practice. Early notable female art musicians who trained academically include late Professor Mosunmola Omibiyi-Obidike, Dr. Joy Lo-Bamijoko, late Professor Lucy Ekweme among others. These scholars had some exposure to classical (art) music before proceeding to formal training in higher institutions within and outside the country. At the acquisition of music academic and professional training, they subsequently fostered music development in practice, research and education. Loko, Faniyi and Odunuga (2014), while discussing femininity in art music with the contribution of women in Nigeria art music, revealed the trio of Omibiyi-Obidike, Lo-Bamijoko, and Ekweme as music professionals and scholars within the Nigerian music academia. Consequently, when opportunities to study music within the country widened through the establishment of more departments of music within existing and new higher institutions, more females received academic music training which equipped them for the music profession. One of the areas of music development is opera or music-theatre. This genre entails setting a story to music with characters and theatrical elements, and as a genre of music and drama competence in both professions is required.

Furthermore, music-theatre became an area of training in Nigeria as music and theatre departments emerged in Nigeria. However, in this study, focus shall be towards opera in music. A few departments of music within the country explores the genre beyond a body of knowledge. The department of music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka which is the foremost music department in Nigeria fosters opera development through her curriculum and students' performance workshops. Department of performing arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin teaches and produces opera (music-theatre) in her sessional productions. Department of music, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, promotes opera in students' performance. In addition, while Music department, Delta State University, produces scholars in opera composition and performance. Equally, Department of music, University of Port Harcourt advances opera among few others. Omojola (2019), in an interview, stressed the impact of operatic activities on him at the University of Nigeria when he was a student. Mokwunyei (2019) corroborated Omojola when she recalled series of

rehearsals and performances at the same University in preparation for productions. Experiences at the institutions became formation stage for the students who later became scholars and continued to advance the development of the genre.

As professionally trained music scholars, female musicologists demonstrate a good level of competence in the music-theatre by performing various roles as either composers, performers or directors during performances at different points and at other times as researchers. Yet they may combine more than one of the roles in their effort to promoting the art and knowledge. Performers in opera may be engaged in principal roles, comprimarios or in the chorus. While the principal role could be a heroine or the villain, the comprimario plays supporting role to the principal character, the chorus is often engaged in the group or crowd scenes. All the roles are important in opera because they depend on each other to achieve successful operatic production. The first female music Professor in Africa, late professor M. A. Omibiyi-Obidike, began her music study at the University of Nigeria before she moved to University of California (UCLA) to continue her musical study. She was an alto singer who performed as solo singer at different occasions and in various choirs from her childhood. Her participation in music-drama was at the University of California (UCLA) opera group is noted by Idolor (2014). “She played the role of mother ‘Asbees’ in the musical ‘Sound of Music’, a production which took her to many places but also brought her into contact with great personalities that enriched her musically” (Idolor, 2014). To play a major role or character in an opera, certain musical factors are essential. Significant among such factors is the vocal strength and range of the character, the tessitura. Major female roles in opera are important and are usually taken by a lyric soprano, dramatic soprano or a coloratura soprano. Nonetheless, a contralto (alto) with deep, rich and reedy timbre performs well as a major character playing a principal role or a comprimario. Hers was a contralto who equally performed as a soloist apart from her role in music-theatre. Invariable, her academic research focused on ethnomusicology and music education. Apart for performances, little is known about advancing opera beyond being a performer. However, subsequent women later proved to have taken opera beyond performance into greater height in Nigeria as noted below.

Joy Ifeoma Nroli Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko



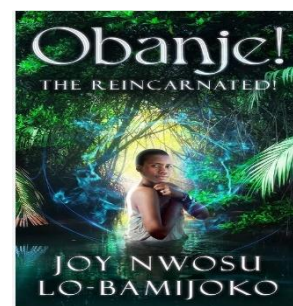
Joy hailed from the South-Eastern region of Nigeria. She was born on August 27, 1940 in Enugu to a musical family, thus she inherited music from her parent. Her father performed on the organ and voice while her mother was an alto singer. They both performed regularly at the Faith Tabernacle Church, Enugu. Ifeoma, as a talented lady, had music rubbed on her from her early years at home and at Bartholomew Church, Enugu. According to her, in an interview (2022), she explained that she participated in festivals of arts organized by the British council, Enugu. The opportunities to feature in such events challenged her to train through imitation of great operatic voices such as Maria Callas and Joan Sutherland.

With time, Ifeoma's fame grew wide in that region because she won the first prize consecutively for seven years within the old Eastern region of Nigeria. Also, her musical prowess was attested to at Holy Rosary College, Enugu. Loko, Faniyi and Odunuga (2014) revealed her roles in operatic works in her tender years and at the age of twenty, she performed the role of Nanki Poo in the Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado to celebrate Nigeria's independence in 1960. What seemed to have fortified her dramatic singing was extraordinary performance that got her the scholarship to study music abroad. She also had music training at the Conservatori Di Musica, Rome, where she studied operatic singing and voice production and performed different roles in a number of operas in Italy. She emphasized that operatic singing is the combination of music and drama. She later moved to the United States of America where she attended the University of Michigan for a Doctorate study. Ogunyemi (2014) affirmed that she remains an enigma in her performances, singing, and broadcasting and in her small world of opera. As a Nigerian female scholar, she became the second Nigerian female to obtain a Ph.D. in music in 1981 as established by Sadoh

(2012) and Loko et al (2014). As an academic, she worked as a lecturer and researcher at the University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria after she left the service of Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) as a producer. Her research in ethnomusicology covers different areas of music, however, her study in performance practice seem significant. While discussing on art music in Nigeria, Lo-Bamijoko (2001) argued that good understanding of singing voice is limited in Nigerian composers. She shared her experience while in the US with an African-American voice coach in comparison with her earlier coach in Italy who was a Caucasian. The Afro-American coach appropriately built her voice to acquire a fully and velvetier colour with strength as against the European texture technique acquired in Italy. Studying her natural and local language speaking voice “the American trainer returned my voice to its natural limpidity and flow” she affirmed.

By extension of her lofty performances as an operatic singer, and in the effort to building good singing culture in Nigeria, she promoted ‘Bel canto’ style of singing (beautiful singing) in Nigeria. She equally developed interest in opera as a way of giving back. She stated that ‘although we did not have theatres as such, we have some Nigerian composers who wrote musical plays. For example, Adam Fiberesima wrote ‘Jaja of Opobo’... Ayo Bankole wrote something about Christmas. Furthermore, the music ingenuity in her extended to becoming a composer as she wrote for her primary instrument, the voice. Many solo songs are to her credit and a music-drama, ‘obanje’. Loko et al (2014) gave credence that “her works are exclusively vocal music composition such as solo songs and one opera titled ‘obanje’, a folk opera”. They highlight some of her compositions which include: ‘Nwam’, ‘Mathias Nwa Igwenegbu’, ‘Abgogho’, and ‘Azania’ among others. This feat ultimately distinguishes her as a female composer in Nigeria. The opera ‘ogbanje was initially written as a play, and in 1977, she wrote the music to it on the request of Professor Ade Ajayi, who was the Vice Chancellor of the University of Lagos when the music department was asked to produce musical performance for the Festival of Arts and Culture, (FESTAC 1977). The performance was a major contribution to the international festival in Lagos. Her motivation was to write drama that can be set to music and she was able to adopt ‘obanje’ story to the music. The opera which was directed by her was not published at the time, however, it was much later published as short story.

Lo-Bamijoko is a prolific writer who not only write music and academic journal publications but writes stories such as ‘I come from Utopia’ published in ‘African voice’, 2007, ‘mirror of our lives’, voices of four Igbo women’ 2001, among others. The latter was shortlisted for Commonwealth Book Contest. *Amason.com* (2022) identifies ‘The legend of the walking dead’, Igbo mythologies. Before her retirement, she served as the head of music department at the University of Lagos in 1986 and later the head of cultural studies unit in the same University.



Josephine Ngozi Mokwunyei



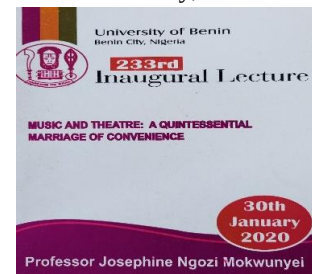
Josephine is an elegant scholar from the royal lineage of ‘Isele-Uku’ kingdom of the old Bendel State, now in Delta State with traceable ancestors to Edo ‘N’orisi’ of the Benin kingdom. She was born on the 12th December, 1952, a young brilliant artistic girl whose interest for the art could be traced to her parents who were fine artistes. She was also influenced by her aunt, ‘Nwolonua’ and her principal at Mary Mount School at Aghor, Mother Cuthbert. Later at the University, she was further polished by Meki Nzewi (now a retired Professor) who discovered her and worked on her talents. Her interest in the performing arts grew so strong that she studied both music and drama consecutively. Her first degree was obtained in music at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1981. Later, she proceeded to study Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan where she obtained the Master degree in 1986. For her Ph.D., she studied at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Accra in 2000. A Diploma in music education in 1975 and a Certificate in general television production in 1983, these experiences made her so versatile. The combination of these areas of knowledge

and skills equipped her and became tools for her to explore a career in the academia as well as in practice, a woman of many parts – a singer, actress, presenter, broadcaster, producer, art director, teacher and a researcher.

As a music artiste, she performed folk and art songs on television and live performances. TV review magazine revealed that she performed in Okechukwu Ndubusi's opera, 'Vengeance of the Lizard' and an adaptation of Iye-Uwa by Meki Nzewi during FESTAC '77. Abe (2021) affirms some of her experiences in opera while at the University of Nigeria, experimentations and series of music-drama by Professor Meki Nzewi made great impacts in her. In addition, an opera performance directed by Okechukwu Ndubuisi in her final year at the University was a memorable experience for her as documented in her inaugural lecture (2020) at the University of Benin. 'It was on this very stage when I played the star role "Bride" in "Bless the Bride", directed by my late lecturer Okechukwu Ndubuisi, an opera by Vivian Ellis, staged by a performing troupe on national tour from the Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, that my journey in UNIBEN began' (Mokunyei, 2020). Her performances extended beyond Nigeria, as she confirmed that, 'I have also been involved in numerous performances of Western opera, contemporary African drama, African folk songs and other musical presentations in different parts of the world, in distant and recent past as well as contemporary times.'

She affirmed during an interview (2020) that she directed an opera and plays, with elaborate music at the University of Benin. One of the plays directed by her is the 'Midnight hotel' written by Femi Osofisan. A major attainment by her at the University of Benin is the establishment of music programme that is currently running at the institution.

A versatile artiste who acts, sings, plays the recorder, violin and the piano, she teaches music performance technique among other courses influencing younger generation. Josephine Mokwunyei rose to the full professorial status in 2014 at the University of Benin raising younger generations of artistes and scholars. She professed the essential marriage between music and theatre in her inaugural lecture at the University of Benin on 30th January, 2020 with the title, 'Music and Theatre: A quintessential marriage of Convenience'. She won several awards and fellowships of different bodies, including: Special Female Undergraduate Scholarship Award, 1976/1981, Ford Foundation Scholar, 1997, Senior Fellow, International Centre for African Music and Dance (ICAMD), 1996, CODESRIA Fellow, North Western University, Chicago, Illinois, USA, 2000, Fellow, 2015. Furthermore, she was a Fellow, Association of Nigerian Musicologists (FANIM) and Fellow, Society of Nigerian Theatre Artistes (SONTA), 2017 among others. She served as the first female head, Department of Theatre Arts and Mass Communication, University of Benin and achieved the take-off of music as a degree programme at the University.



Conclusion

Opera in Nigeria has evolved and developed through the contributions of many connoisseurs in art music. The female gender is doubtless a force to reckon with in the genre. Although, male folks appear to be on the leading edge in the contribution to its development in Nigeria, efforts of female scholars are undeniably evident in the genre. Early female scholars in Nigeria have shown to be proficient in the multi-disciplinary genre of music, drama and theatre. Musical strides of late Professor M.O. Omibiyi-Obidike pioneered the path for female music-theatre scholars and artistes while subsequent efforts of Dr. Lo-Bamijoko and Professor Mokwunyei in establishing greater impact show the possibility of female wits in music-theatre and other areas of music study. It is therefore very important that female music scholars as well as female artistes should intensify efforts in the path already channelled by the early female musicologists in the genre as identified in this study. The female gender has a lot of influence and contributions to make. Prospective female music scholars demonstrate excellent music-theatre potentials at the undergraduate level which need to be expanded beyond the institutions of learning. Much more grounds are yet to be covered in the genre and it takes great courage to take the bull by the horn despite enormous challenges in the genre. If Dr. Lo-Bamijoko and Professor Mokwunyei could leave their indelible marks, it is possible to build on already



laid foundation by upcoming female scholars to expand the frontiers of knowledge and practice of music-theatre in Nigeria.

References

- Abe, A. (2021) *Musical Study of some Operas by selected Professionally Trained Nigerian Composers*, Ph.D. Dissertation of the Department of Music, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.
- Abe, A. (2023) A Study of Nigeria's Opera and Composers. UNIUYO Journal of Humanities, Vol 27. No 1. University of Uyo, Uyo. https://www.uujh.org/rdc_1?article=uujh/6Ausu. 65e2e364e641f.pdf
- Ekwueme, L. (2008) A basic guide to Music Appreciation. Apex Books.
- Idolor, E. (2014) African Musicology: The Contribution of Mosunmola A. Omobiyi-Obidike in C. Aluede, K. Samuel, F. Adedeji (ed) *African Musicology: Past, Present and Future*, Timade Ventures.
- Lo-Bamijoko, J. (2001) Art Singing in Nigeria: The Composer and the Performer in M.A Omobiyi-Obidike (ed) *African Art Music in Nigeria*. Stirling-Horden Publisher (Nig) Ltd.
- Loko, O.O., Faniyi K.O. and Odunuga A.F. (2014) Femininity in Art Music: Contribution of Women to Nigerian Art Music in C. Aluede, K. Samuel, F. Adedeji (ed) *African Musicology: Past, Present and Future*, Timade Ventures.
- Mokwunyei, J. N. (2001) Relevance of Nigerian Art Music in Nigeria Contemporary Theatre, in M.A. Omobiyi-Obidike (ed) *African art music in Nigeria*. Stirling-Horden Publisher (Nig) Ltd.
- Mokwunyei, J. N. (2020) Music and Theatre: A quintessential Marriage of Convenience. 233 Inaugural Lecture Series, University of Benin Press.
- Ogunyemi, B. (2014) Remembering Lo-Bamijoko at 70. Newswatch Magazine. Lagos.
- Omojola, B. (1995) *Nigerian Art Music*, Institut Francais de Recherche en Afrique (IFRA)
- Sadoh, G. (2012) Joy Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko: The Saga of a Nigerian Female Ethnomusicologists. universe.