

**THE SPIRIT OF A PEOPLE’S MUSIC: *An Introduction to the Aesthetics of the Musical works of Laz. N. Ekwueme***

*By*

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Leonard Bernstein once said that Ludwig Van Beethoven was **not** a great melodist, **not** a great harmonist and, **not even** a great orchestrator; but still he succeeded summarily, by sheer force of his aesthetic will, to compel the tones and compositive materials at his disposal, into perfect compliance with what belongs among the most aesthetically convincing and satisfying musical works the world knows today.

“Not a great melodist” – What is that? “Not great harmonist” and “not even a great orchestrator” – What are these?

Of the two groups of Bernstein’s statement, the second will have serious relevance in a discussion on Laz Ekwueme’s musical works.

The tones, and compositive materials at the disposal of Laz Ekwueme were not the enigmatic scale of Giuseppe Verde, not the complex chromatic chords of Riemann’s axis theory nor – to be sure – the dodecaphonic series of Arnold Schoenberg, no – not these at all! But leaving these aside when he wishes and when he wants to communicate with the folks, he comes to the level of their language – diatonicism. This, in no way conflicts with the fact that he masters those other languages, which he, anyway, allowed to peer into several of his works in moments of high emotional outpouring. And why not?

Didn’t the simple pentaphonic diatonic theme of the Ninth symphony of Ludwig Van Beethoven develop to contain some of the most chromatic utterances of that composer.

According to this author, Beethoven's music was the first in the contemporary time to reflect the German folk spirit in no mistakable terms.

In much the same way, Laz Ekwueme's music reflects the spirit of African music in general and, of Igbo music in particular. The frequent reference to Igbo music techniques, scales, rhythms, melodic standards and harmonic patterns imbue this music with the best characteristic of African music. This music breathes the spirit of the Igbo folk practically – just as the best of our folk songs Laz Ekwueme succeeds summarily in expounding the Igbo music much in the same way as Bela Bartok and Zoltan Kodaly, succeeded in expounding the Hungarian folk music by letting its spirit permeate every facet of their own creative work.

Emmanuel Kant in his *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, refers to folk music “as the spirit of the people;” its willfulness, spontaneity, communality and natural beauty qualifies that music – nay all folk artistic expressions – for that which that philosopher designated as the “*spiritus aestheticus communis*”.

‘Natural beauty’, yes! But we are not talking of “naturalness” in the sense of “roughness,” or “ruggedness.” This, however, is a class in the category of nature's beauty.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, debate over “nature” and “art” raged between those who, like Zarlino, believed that nature is the example of perfect beauty and those who believed that art improved on nature, that is, that art can improve and/or compliment/supplement nature i.e. natural beauty, to render it more beautiful.

The complicated nature of this problem particularly when talking about fine Arts is that we judge the beauty of nature with the eye of the beauty of art and the beauty of art with the eye of the beauty of nature.

As Kant observed, the more an artwork looks natural, the more it is adjudged beautiful and successful, and the more nature looks artistic (like an art), the more we appreciate it as beautiful.

Referring to folk music and art music, both represent the product of the human spirit. One of the several definitions of a musical folklorist is one who works with folk musical material in a bid to create new musical artworks that resemble the old folk ones. If we say that folk music is the spirit of the people, we mean that a musical folklorist creates new folk-resembling music. The music is

not folkmusic but has the ingredients of which folk music is made, particularly the spirit of the folk/people. The music of Laz Ekwueme, breathes that spirit – the spirit of a people.

This write-up is not intended as an analytical essay of Laz’s work: other authors, among them some of my colleagues namely Steve Olusoji, Albert Oikelome, Seyi Kenny and Aaron Carter-Cohn, have moved in that direction. Any further analytical work must aim at applying more advanced tools to investigate and highlight other interesting aspects of Laz’s music.

Our concern here is to introduced some of the parameters and visionary angles to be considered in any genuine or scholarly effort to investigate the aesthetic dimension of Laz’s music. Thus, we first start from the formative background of the composer to some aspects of his works, in very concise and abridged manner.

## **PERSONALIA**

Information concerning the vast and versatile education of Laz Ekwueme, the high quality of his education, the countries and the institutions where he studied, the years when he studied in chronological order, his experiences both as student and as worker – as academic and as professional – these are all copiously **hinted on** in his Curriculum Vitae, which appear at the inner and outer back cover of his book – “Essays on African Music Theory” published by the music publishing unit of the LENAUS ADVERTISING AND PUBLISHING LTD in 2002.

The musical component of Laz Ekwueme’s education – after the thorough foundation supplied by his indigenous traditional education sifted through an enlightened and deeply Christian religious parentage – received no small boost and impetus at the great high school, the government secondary school, Umuahia, which he attended.

I would like to permit myself a little digression for a few comments on the status of music in that high school – the Government Secondary School, Umuahia.

The secondary school which was modeled after the British public schools. There, music was recognized and taught as an essential academic discipline – like any other academic discipline offered in that school. Music was not seen or just conceded a place in the TIME TABLE in order to merely honour its manifestation in the local culture – in the fashion that many of the formulators of our educational curricula would have it today. Rather, in that school, the teaching

and study of music – that acknowledged universal language – was rightly seen as the teaching and study of the norms of this universal phenomenon. Underlying the formulation of such educational/teaching curricula is the philosophy that excellence and/or achievement in any of the “quadrivial disciplines”<sup>1</sup> of which music is one, was a positive addition to the advancement of human civilization and wellbeing. Achievement/success in music, was not only glory for the achiever’s home nation, but also and –importantly – a revered contribution to the artistic patrimony of the world.

In the same vein, achievement/success in the remaining “mathematical” disciplines (in modern times, the four quadrivial disciplines would simply translate as our science subjects – say, physics/mathematics for astronomy) – is also glory for the achiever’s nation and a plus step in the match of human technological advancement.

We recognize the argument, which is still current, over the possibility or not, of achieving serious success in the sciences (mathematical disciplines) without the mind-forming and character – building influence of the humanities among which music has come, in our own times, to be grouped and reckoned with as the highest ranking.

It is well-known that academic disciplines are interrelated and often assist each other mutually. Hence, the much spoken-about versatile validity of the musical discipline is real.

This being the case, a person can be good in more than one discipline; such a person then chooses the discipline in which to devote his professional energies. Many of our colleagues (music-learned) have had to make such a choice. This was the case with Laz Ekwueme also; and he undoubted achieved and continues to achieve in his chosen field – music.

Briefly put, Laz Ekwueme’s mastery of his indigenous culture and folklore – a fact which is richly demonstrated in his creative works – his academic and literary formation, his sojourn in foreign hands among foreign cultures (this helping to delineate and crystallize his own home culture in his mind), his experiences as academic and as professional – all these, contributed to the formation of his rich sensibility – aesthetic in general, but musical/artistic in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> *This allusion to the “quadrivium” of the four mathematical disciplines (Arithmetic’s, geometry, astronomy and music) is intentional; for the “quadrivium” had been compulsory in all institutions of higher learning in Europe since the days of the Roman Empire till the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century A. D. and beyond.*

## LAZ EKWUEME AND MUSICAL CREATIVITY

The vast range of Laz Ekwueme's music is a testimony of his creative genius: we are not talking in numerical term; rather, he was able to invest on diverse musical forms and idioms and he achieved masterpieces of exemplary beauty in each of those forms and mediums: instrumental, orchestral and vocal mediums.

Laz's earliest dated collection of musical compositions is titled "Various Chants, Solos, Part songs and Anthems"; it carries the date 1950 – 55. This makes it likely that he started trying his hand at creativity – precisely at musical creativity to which we shall exclusively devote this preliminary investigation –very early in his life. But the works we shall refer to in this essay are those which represent his artistic personality since they contain the germ of his maturity, written as they were during and after his academic formation in musical institutions of higher learning. These works, we believe, represent Laz's most personal utterances and his authentic aesthetic sensibility.

Let us add here that, the published literary and theoretical writings of Laz also date from the period of his academic career in higher institutions and after.

Normally, earlier works of the composer would have needed to be given, at least, a comparing attention: I mean, to visualize the artistic development of the composer. We ask to dispense with such things here in order to concentrate on the composer's personal and unalloyed utterance.

A list of many of Laz's works are available in the internet; but that list is far from being exhaustive. We however base our broad classification of his musical output so far, on that list.

Following this gross classification, we could mention a few examples from each class.

In the instrumental class we distinguish between his

- (a) Instrumental ensembles, notably
  - i. The trio (for flute, clarinet and pianoforte)
  - ii. the brass quartett and
  - iii. the string quartett

(b) Orchestral idiom, here we shall mention only five

- i. the beautiful orchestral version of the song (the “Lord is my Shepherd” for orchestral alone)
- ii. the tone poem “flow gently sweet Niger” for Chamber Orchestra
- iii. the Nigerian Rhapsody for Orchestra string
- iv. concertino in D for pianoforte and chamber orchestra
- v. dance of the Black witches (a string quintet (2 NNN)).

Comments on these works will be more revealing if taken alongside his other works, precisely his vocal works. It is, as a matter of fact, in the vocal medium that Laz Ekweme majorly invested his music compositional genius. Among the larger forms we can mention his.

- i. Missa Africana – a full concert mass for contralto solo and double chorus.
- ii. A night in Bethlehem – a chamber opera and
- iii. Psalm 23 – for contralto and chamber orchestra.

Other vocal works include many solo songs with pianoforte accompaniment we should mention here the two published volumes of solo songs with pianoforte accompaniment titled: 5 sacred songs (for solo voices).

The other is titled 7 art songs (those are also for solo voices)

One published volume of choral pieces contains six songs for mixed voices (soprano, contractor, tenor and bass). This is titled: 6 introils and the graces (in Igbo and English).

There is also another publication of choral music titled Nsukka Responses and Pater Noster. This is designed for Anglican Liturgy. But these few publication can only represent just a meager percentage of Laz Emkwueme’s vocal works which constitute the major bulk of his creative output.

Laz’s vocal works consist, in the main, of choral compositions for mixed voices, for male voice choir alone and for female voice choir alone. In some cases, these choruses have solo parts attached to their (soprano solo, or alto, tenor arbaritune solo).

Laz also made sizeable number of arrangements of other works – folk songs, spirituals, latin motets etc. These were not original composition of his; he arranged them for mixed voices or adapted for other voice combinations reflecting in that his own aesthetic ideal and interpretation of the work concerned.

Typologically speaking, Laz’s choral works would fall with one or the other of the following:

- i. Introits – sacred choral works
- ii. Mass – Responses
- iii. Motets/Anthems
- iv. Carols
- v. Spirituals
- vi. Glee
- vii. Lullaby

In each of these types of compositions, he achieved pieces of exemplary beauty: things like “Chineke no n’ime ulo nso ya” and “Chineke bu Mmo” (both from the introit type), the Missa Africana (a mass), “Eagle Voices Anthem” and “Welu Oso Welu ije” (motet & Anthem) type in our list. We cannot mention or speak any of them singly in an essay of this nature which is meant to be an introductory intervention in the aesthetics of Laz Ekwueme’s musical works.

### **MELODY IN LAZ EKWUEME**

Two main types of melody are noted in the vocal works of Laz Ekwueme. His instrumental compositions particularly by models of the first type which follows.

Prosaic Melody Type (i.e. the thorough-composed- “durchkompenierte” melodies).

This type of melody results generally from a free treatment of – the text/lyrics set to music. In this case, whether the set text is a poem – consisting of stanzas and strophes – or is prose, the song is conceived as a single flowing melody line from the beginning to the end. Where the text is made up of stanzas consisting of a number of strophes, the different stanza are either made (a) to be sung to the same single melody (with the necessary language – necessitated modifications in each stanza, in case of African languages/poems) or (b) the stanza might be discarded and the poem set as single continuous line of thought or story and given required musical treatment.

Some examples of the (a) species of treatment in the prosaic melody type are seen in most of the English language composition. Songs like “Two Lagosians,” “Take Heart, Sweet Mary” (From the opera – “A Night in Bethlehem).

These two songs are really strophic (made of stanzas; they have two stanzas each). The music of the second stanza of “Take Heart...” had slight modifications both for poetic and aesthetic reasons.

The most representative example of this – (a) species is the orchestral song “Psalm 23 – The Lord Is My Shepherd.”

Beautiful examples of the (a) species melodies in the local languages abound.

We can mention things like the “Nwoyoyo” lullaby, the contilena discant-solo that sails on top of the estinato chorus in “Ote Nkwu”, the ballade – “Nne, Bia Nyerem Aka,” “Nno”, “Nwa N’akwa Akwa” (lullaby) “The Arima”, the tenor discant to the Yoruba language carol. – “Eku ewu”, etc

### **Polyphony as Prose**

The (a) species of melodies are mainly performed by the solo voice. But it must be pointed out that, all the contrapuntal polyphonies (as opposed to the homophonic polyphonies) of Laz Ekwueme, are prosaic and should be viewed along with (a) – species. Thus, the “Missa africana,” the “six introits and the grace” (in Igbo and English for choirs S. A. T. B), and other contrapuntal polyphonies by the composer are to be mentioned alongside other pieces of the prosaic melody treatment type. This stands to reason; for all choral works appear to “prosaically”

### **Some Means for securing Prosaicity in Music – Melody and Polyphony**

Imitative entries (e.g. Chineke bu Mmo”), ostinato (e.g. in, “Ote Nkwu”), vocables and pedals (e.g. in |”Chineke no n’ime Ulo nso ya”) and, at times, instrumental bridge phrases (e.g. in “The arima”), etc are all used by Laz effectively as prosaic worktools in his contrapuntal vocal compositions, to bind isolated melodie phrases into single flowing melodic song lines; and to prolong/bridge the otherwise strophic metric-melodic phrases (e.g. in “Elimeli”, “Oge” etc).



ii. Poetry-Driven Types OR Strophic Melodies/Songs

This category comprises the large bulk of Laz Ekwueme’s vocal works which follow the Igbo (African) traditional music making technique and melodic patterning. Our title – poetry-driven...” wishes to allude to the fact that most African/Igbo **oral** poetry are recited in some form of singing – in fact, like the “recitation” of the odes of the classical Greek poetry.

Most of the songs available to me for the illustration of this category of melodies are the ones written in the native language of the composer – Igbo. The composer is, as a matter of fact, a consummate Igbo poet - a language he masters so well.

The melodies follow the meaning-providing accents etc of words of the poetic text. The result are finely-crafted essentially. **Logogenic melodies:** Logogenic, yes! But by no means devoid of ravishing emotional content supplied by the skillful hand of the melodist par excellence; for, the composer is a singer, a voice-specialist.<sup>3</sup>

The songs of this category are mainly of call-and answer construction type – a typical traditional African music – making mechanism. The call with answer (forming a pair) make-up the melodic phrase; the length of this phrase defines the melodic rhythm which is the sum total of the morae, together with the time lapse before (if any) and after (if any also) the entrance of the answer and the call respectively. Example, in the carol

“Nne n’eku N nwa Zamiliza”

1 1 1 1 1 1 + 1 1 1 1 +

If we include the two time lapses represented by the + - signs before the entry of the answer and (after the answer) before the fresh call, we have a total of twelve equi-spatial units i.e. ten equally spaced syllables plus two equal time lapses each being equal in duration with a syllable of the strophe.

Metrically, these twelve equi-spatial units and *morae* described above, total to twelve compound duple metre bars.

These two bars are then artificially but artistically (in fact, for ease of visualization) divided into two, each contains two of 6/8 bars. The first two bars which is the call, commences acephalically

in order to accommodate the pre-tonic syllable, “N”, of “Nne” the Igbo word for “mother”. The following two bars giving the answer; “zamiliza” is a rhythmic jargon that has no literary meaning just like the “fallala” of the English folksongs.

Very illustrative of such strophic melody type with the twelve-pulses melodic rhythmic phrase divided into two groups-each containing six pulses or two dotted crotchet (as articulated in the bass line of the piano accompaniment) – is the song “Oge”. Here also, the first bar represents the call while the second “Tinkolonkon” (tinkokolon tinkom) – another meaningless phrase – represents the answer.

The character of pieces written by the composer in compound duple meter and in simple triple metre is generally lyrical (e.g. “The Arima”) and gentle. They are more *andante contabile* than *ritmato marcato*.

This observation is valid despite the fact that the composer could achieve this sort of melodic lyricism in some of his songs written in simple duple 2/4 time or 4/4 time e.g. the carol “Nwa n’akwa Akwa”. But generally, simple duple metres (2/2, 4/4) were reserved for most of the “glees”.

Some examples of this (simple duple) metric usage include, “Elimeli”, with its sixteen – pulse melodic rhythmic phrase, and the “Obi dimkpa”, (also 16-pulse comprised in the call – and answer format) and the eighteen pulse melodic-rhythmic phrase in the gleeful Animals carol – “Amulu Eze uwa n’ime Uno anu.”

### **SCALE IN LAZ EKWUEME**

Many of the original (as against arrangement of existing folk tunes) compositions of Laz. Ekwueme, were set in diatonic scale. And no matter how much the composer indulged in chromaticism, the tonality of his works remains quite clear.

Laz participated in the modalism of many 20<sup>th</sup> century alongside other composer like Strawinsky, Aron Copland etc.

Thus, the beautiful motet “O Buru na Jehova Ewughi Ulo” was couched in G-dorian while the “La ILLa ALLah” Hausa anthem and the “JARIRI YARO” – that finely – wrought (Hausa) carol

– are both in pure dorian mode notwithstanding the raised third at the final cadence of last mentioned piece )”Jariirin .....”.

Other African tone system were used by the composer but not consistently. They would appear in the main melody of a piece but come to be abandoned later either in the course of the melodic development or in the course of its harmonization as exemplified in the hexatonic melody theme of the Igbo carol “Nne n’eku Nwa...”.

Scales in other non-African language pieces and instrumental compositions are in the normal major-minor key-system.

## **HARMONY**

Laz Ekwueme made use of two types of harmony in his compositions:

- a. Homophonic harmony corresponding to the earlier mentioned homophonic counterpoint, and
- b. Contrapuntal harmony corresponding to the contrapuntal polyphony.

Some interesting features characterized Laz’s homophonic harmony. First, the composer ably uses the classical voice leading in three, four, five etc parts employing both diatonic and chromatic chords at will, to achieve his aesthetic goals: he does this consistently whether in harmonizing the so-called logogenic African, (Igbo, Yoruba etc) melodies where the reflection of accent direction is necessary for the understandability of the lyrical texts, or in harmonizing melodies in such languages where accent directions do not influence the meaning of the text e.g. English, latin etc. Secondly, pure syllabic homophonic harmony were used mainly in chorus-responses consisting of “nonsense” words e.g. the chorus-response to the glee, “Elimeli” is Bundum Budum Budu Bum Bum Bu, or the ostinato-chorus to “Ote Nkwu” – “Igbam chikili chin chin chin”. Since such words have no meaning, they can be twisted any how to achieve any desired harmonic effect; and as he himself wrote ( ), the harmony can move upward at such parts. But syllabic harmony is only a part of the composer’s choral artifice and worktool. syllabic harmony is used in the harmonization of selected portions of selected portions of African language melodies, under certain conditions and in specific cases. Such conditions and specific cases are worth careful and attentive study.

But by far, the larger portion of Laz's choral output are set with contrapuntal harmony. Contrapuntal harmonic manipulation includes such harmonic devices as derive from various contrapuntal devices – initiative/successive entry of voices, (e.g. “Chineke Bu Muo”), non-syllabic harmonic device (e.g. passing tones – “while shepherds watched “, particularly, from bar 51 to bar 55, exchanges of short complimentary rhythmic-melodic phrases in the harmonizing voices e.g. “There is a little child,” use of ostinati and use of vowel (vocables) melodies e.g. “Chineke no n’ime Ulo nso ya,” “Eku Ewu” – “Nwa N’akwa Akwa” etc.

### **Some special Harmonic Effect and Text Understandability**

Another interesting feature of Laz's harmonic usage is what can be termed vowel harmony, that is, the use of different vowel sound either simultaneously (one on top of the other: for instance on “U” on top of “O”; “O” on top of “A” etc in different voice parts, moving together, or successively, different vowels following each other in succession imitating the vowels sound of the sung lyric (text). Text understandability is also a characteristics of Laz's and the two ways mechanisms described above are among the ways through which the composer ensures that the text is clearly understood without renouncing to the use of the classical harmonic resources.

Other ways employed for ensuring clarity and intelligibility of text include the exploitation of typically African harmonic procedure wherewith syllabic homophonic parallel voice leading in 4ths, 5ths and thirds (at times) are deliberately used at key text phrases; some times also some words of the text are mutilated and turned into incoherent quasi meaningless phrases in one, two or more voice parts are made to match with the text of the voice that is singing the real text of the melody. A study of “Nwa n’akwa akwa,” “Eku ewu” and other larger indigenous language polyphonic compositions of Laz will be revealing in this regard. We should also mention the simultaneous use of different words in different voice parts (of course, without changing the meaning of the main text of the song, and the use of unison to underline important stanzas of the text of the melody among the artifices to ensure text clarity. All the listed artifices contribute in procuring at one and the same time text understandability, harmonic richness, and sobriety as well as that peculiar hallow and masterliness known to characterize the music of this composer.

Summarizing, it is worth indicating that a careful study of the larger choral works of Laz, particularly those works in indigenous Nigeria language (Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa etc) will reveal

many other compositional artifices which contribute to aesthetic variety sensed in this composer's music.

### Locating other works of Laz

Apart from the his choral works scattered in different books and not mentioning the choral (vocal ensemble) writings contained in the chamber opera – “ A night in Bethlehem”- and the Missa Africana, Laz's larger choral works are to be found in the yet unpublished collection titled “*Christmas carols from Nigeria composed, collected and edited by Laz Ekwueme*”. Of the twenty- eight songs contained in that collection; eighteen were composed Laz Ekwueme. They are the following:

- i. While shepherd watched(this is actually from his opera,”A night in Bethlehem”)
- ii. Nyin ini kom f {in efik/Ibibio}
- iii. Sosong abasi {in efik /Ibibio}
- iv. Jari rin yaro
- v. Abu umu anu
- vi. Jesu abia
- vii. Kpakpando n' igwe
- viii. Mary muru nwa ohuru
- ix. Nne n'eku nwa
- x. Nno
- xi. Nwa n'akwa akwa
- xii. Nwantakiri jisos (for female voices-SSAA)
- xiii. Ozi oma
- xiv. Umu uwa golibe (for female voices-SSAA)
- xv. Kabiyesi, olorun oba
- xvi. Mimo,mimo, oluwa

Some other choral works by the composer are to be found scattered in other unpublished collection for example, in the collection titled “*the Laz Ekwueme chorale repertoire No. 36, volume one,*” we encounter the following:

- i. “La lllah illah allah” the beautiful hausa song I have mentioned elsewhere

- ii. “Ote nkwu” the elsewhere igbo glee I mentioned elsewhere also.
- iii. “Obi dimkpa” another igbo glee I have spoken about it also.
- iv. “Oburu na jehova ewughi ulo” another igbo chorus (a newt. I referred elsewhere to)
- v. “beware, brother, beware” (a five part choral anthem)

Other choral works are contained in the “DRAFT PROGRAMME” of the anniversary concert for the tenth year of Bayelsa state on September the 23<sup>rd</sup> 2011. The compositions here are mainly in English language. There are twenty-one songs in this collection and his contribution includes

- i. Fanfare to Nigeria” subtitled in mobilization of Nigerians lofty goals. High ideas and patriotism” SATB
- ii. Hurray for democracy - SATB
- iii. Come together, delta youth- SATB

These works represents the larger bulk of the most widely performed compositions of Laz Ekwueme.

The vocal compositions – particularly, the choral marks – of Laz, are highly varied in form and techniques. Technical names, such as motets, madrigals, anthems etc are applied without in any way losing sight of their twentieth century freshness and innovations.

Yet we are seriously reminded of the work Jasper Kerl which aesthetic was summarized and preached by the prelates of the council of Trent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: “Unitas in varietate”. This is far from being farfetched. For the alternation of homophony and polyphony of various shades and colours cannot but lend that “variety” to each “unit” or piece of Laz’s choral works.

### **FORM IN LAZ EKWUEME**

Form could mean a number of different things when used loosely in music. But in music analysis in particular, the word form, would strictly refer to the structural frame of a piece of music. This understanding of form is exactly what we wish to refer to here.

Generally speaking, Laz prefers tight or closed forms. This is evident from an analysis of his more extended works for instance, chamber opera, “A Night in Bethlehem, “Missa Africana”, and “Psalm 23 (solo voice) made for the ABA – structure. But a good many of the non-African language, (English and latin) choral works are mottettistic or madigalistic in form with that

typical panel construction that characterized the classical motets and madrigals of the 16 – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. But now in reality they are just a reminiscence of the old forms; we can easily and rightly talk only of neo-madrigalism.

Illustrative are such things as “Come Together, Delta youth,” “Hurray for Democracy,” etc. The majority of those larger choral work, among them, the larger bulk of the carols – did also achieve the tight and closed ternary structural form typical of Laz’s composition. Often the ternary form is ensured by the key disposition whereby the middle section is defined by a different key (e.g. in “Nwa n’akwa akwa”, “Eku Ewu...”, “Kpakpando n’Igwe”, “Mary Muru Nwa Ohuru” etc. In some others, a new panel is interpolated to usher in the repeat of the initial panel (e.g. in the ABA of “jaririn Yaro” Hausa carol where the B- section starting at bar 49 and marked C in the original score, ushers in the initial theme at bar 65 marked D also in the original score).

Many of the glees of Laz Ekwueme are in AB – form which actually is the format of the call-and answer melody. This is a justification of the composer’s postulate that: form is rhythm at long span. (See things like “Elimeli,” “Obi Dimkpa” etc)

### **SYMBOLISM IN LAZ EKWUEME’S MUSIC**

Apart from linguistic (language) symbolism richly represented by the his copious use of proverbs which is a typical Igbo/African traditional way of communicating serious meaning in speaking (as well as in singing), Laz made use of other symbols in his music. In fact, we can summarized the topic with a simple classificatory division such as:

- a. Linguistic/language symbolism which include
  - i. the use of proverbs
  - ii. Conomatopeias
- b. Musical symbolism
  - i. Harmonic symbolism
  - ii. Melodic symbolism – vocable melodies

I have already identified the use of proverbs; but the use of onomatopoeic meaningless words to signify or convey the sound of an item or object meant or named, and/or the mood evoked by a term or an expression used in the text/lyrics of a song, is exemplified in such instances as the

representation of the sound of the palm-wine tapper's cutting and chiseling of the palm pulp with his knife—"Igbam chikili chikili, igbam chikili chin chin chin" (ref. "Ote Nkwu"), the passage of time in the song "Oge" is symbolized by the sound "Tinkololon kom" (This is similar to the English "tick-tick" of the clock); the response "samala" in "Umu Uwa golibe" carol symbolizes the light-hearted and joyful rejoicing, a response to the invitation," Rejoice children of the world" which is the translation of "Umu Uwa Golibe".

Thus, even in the traditional folk songs with such call-and answer patterns, deeper analysis would reveal the symbolic meaning of those **answers** which are usually referred to as non-sense words or phrases. So, such things as "Tigidim, tigidim, tigidim, bom" in the carol, "Jesu Abia", the "Tingelengele tingele" in the carol "Amulu Eze Uwa" (carol of the animals") etc. symbolize concrete things from foot-stamps of joyous dancing to light-hearted rejoicing.

b. In the musical symbolism which we split into two, a good example of the

i. **harmonic symbolism** is found at least in the carol "Ozioma" where the major seconds are laid under the word "mgbiligba" (bells) to signify the dissonant but happy tintinnabulation of bells in bar 77ff. Already the joyous mood of the good news (trans. "Ozi Oma") had been announced at bar 3ff at the opening of the song by a proficuous arrangement of the major seconds of the dominant seventh chord, to symbolize the chiming of the bells which announce the good news of the arrival of the Messiah.

ii. We shall mention also only one out of the many instances of **melodic symbolism**.

By melodic symbolism I wish to indicate the intended affect/effect created by the composer by dint of untexted sounds – vocables, yodels, hums etc which are prolonged alongside a piece in one or more voice. For example, the atmosphere of hallow and splendor, of respectful hush created by the rocking lullabic melodic vocables harmonized with smooth-flowing triads which introduced and accompanied the tenor solo in the introit "Chineke no n'ime Ulo Nso ya" (trans "God is in his holy temple"). The mystery of the presence of God and the hallow and holy atmosphere is well foreshadowed and symbolized by the vocable harmonious songs with the "U" – sound all through. This type of melodic symbolism are rife in several works of the composer. Another type of melodic symbolic usages occur when the composer employs an appropriate interjection vowels to accompanied or underlay a word or an expression enunciated in one or



more voices in an ongoing piece of music. Mark the use of “Ah ...”, “Oh...” and “U” in different songs. Such interjections as express things like sorrow (e.g. “Oh”) or rejoicing (e.g. “Ah ...”). Sometimes such symbolisms follow the word text in succession, “living” out the word-text with the adequate emotional outcry – highlighting the intended affect.

Melodic symbolisms are copiously used by the composer and they add to those effects that identify and mark him out in a special way. It is also among the music (singing) - making traits of the people of his ethnic group: the interjection of hummings, vocables, sound-signs expressing different emotions and various vocable melodies while singing together is a stock-in-trade of the Igbo.

### **LAZ EKWUEME AND ARTISTIC COMMITMENT**

Artistic commitment is a heavy word and, in artistic circles, it often carries serious political connotation, because a very wrong and demagogic vision of it, views it as a confrontation against a usually dictatorial and oppressive regime. But, artistic commitment has often meant or has often been addressed towards creating the awareness of better options in face of a choice between two alternatives.

Laz established a choral group named ‘**Laz Ekwueme national choral**. He composed for this group; and he is responsible for the training of the many young persons who join the group. Learning and performing classical music is an exercise in discipline, and youths that learn and perform such music, normally acquire healthy outlook on life, discriminating and sound judgement ability. They acquire more refined feeling. In short, they usually impact more positively towards a healthier polity both ethically and aesthetically.

Closer analysis of some the choral compositions of Laz would make one identify the composer with the most positive aspects of artistic commitment. Such exhortatory lyrics as we encounter in works like “Fanfare to Nigeria,” “Hurray for Democracy”, “Come Together, Delta Youth!” and the admonitory text of songs like “Obi Dimkpa” etc are all quite revealing of an inner richness that manifest itself in good words for the healing consumption of minds towards the creation of a better polity.

## **THE MEANING OF CHORALITY IN LAZ EKWUEME**

Statistically expressed, it will not be any exaggeration to say that four-fifths of Laz Ekwueme's compositions are for the voice of which practically all, with only a few exception, are for choral voices. This fact is significant in assessing Laz's works: he is of the Igbo ethnic group and, as was said earlier he is versed in the culture of his people.

Choral singing – in fact, choral action – is the mainstay of Igbo music making – of Igbo society.

In music aesthetics, choral music has been used to signify different things among others, objectivity declaration as in the early pre-Gluck) operas, the voice of conscience and reflection as in the cantatas and oratorios, the voice of the people as in the operas of classical and romantic eras, anonymous/metaphysical “voice”, soliloquies etc

Apart from these and other usages of chorality which are to be found also in Laz Ekwueme, it should be highlighted here that, true to the Igbo communalism, choral music says “we” – no matter the text of the song, that is, no matter whether the poem is saying “I” or “We” or “they” and no matter the gender.

That is the spirit of Igbo custom and action: chorality is unanimity, objectivity, the voice of reasoning, confraternity, mass resolution and communal action. Even the dance of the Igbo is virtually all group dance – the dance which is a sister art to music. Laz's chorality is the deepest and sincerest expression of Igbo cultural philosophy and, on the global plane, a proclamation of universal confraternity.

## **THE SPIRIT OF THE PEOPLE'S MUSIC**

Earlier in this essay, we recalled the statement of Emmanuel Kant critique of Judgments that folk music is the spirit of the people. Now, the larger bulk of Laz's vocal compositions are for the choir and in Igbo. The melodies of virtually all Laz's works breathe the folk air; but, particularly, his choral works, thrive in Igbo folklorism: the terse compact and tuneful voice leading, the alternating binary formal organization (call-an response), the use of typically African/Igbo harmonic principles, the exhortatory and admonitory lyrics, the use of proverbs and allegories, horizontal polymetric rhythmic organization – these and others more, are among the work tool of Laz the composer. Apart from the chorality about which we spoke above, these elements are

included in the characteristic marks of Igbo folk music and Laz Ekwueme's choral music represents these qualities in original authentic manners. The music is written with the spirit of the people, and it is for the people. In fact, these works merit to be branded as the spirit of the people in the sense of the German philosopher – Emmanuel Kant.

As earlier said, this essay does not lay any claim to exhaustiveness: we have only attempted it as an introductory intervention. Future investigation will, like the type done by my colleagues, and others, go into more details. But, if we have succeeded in shewing that this music represents indeed the spirit of the (Igbo) people at the deeper level of its inspiration, our effort will not have been in vain.

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(See in the Text)