

LAZARUS EKWUEME: A HUMANISTIC SCHOLAR-ARTISTE.

BY

OLUSOJI, STEPHEN Ph.D

**THE DEPARTMENT OF CREATIVE ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS,
AKOKA**

INTRODUCTION

Lazarus Ekwueme is of a variety of significance to many people in and outside the academia. He is viewed differently by different persons. His intimidating profile is as a result of his outstanding achievements in the academia, the society, and in the culture of both his Igbo people and the entire Africa. He is the traditional ruler of Oko autonomous community in Orumba North local government area of Anambra State Nigeria. Laz. as he is fondly called by his students and admirers, had a chequered career at the University of Lagos where he rose to become a professor of music – the first to be appointed in that field by University. He was for eight years the university orator and at present, an emeritus professor of music of the same University. While responding to a question in an interview granted to a Nigerian newspaper, Laz has this to say about his contributions to academia and the larger society:

‘..... For instance, look at myself, 38 years of humanistic teaching, I have the highest honour Nigeria can bestow on people for intellectual the Nigerian National order of merit. I have made my mark in scholarship, leadership, artistic performance, led Nigerian contingent abroad, many times and many ways’ (Ekwueme, 2012:31).

Prof. Laz, who was born in 1936, is Nigeria’s most certificated musicologist (Omojola, 1995). The public and the layman on the street would probably see him as a promoter of

good choral music especially with his ‘Laz Ekwueme chorale’ founded on December, 13, 1974 that has been at the forefront of promoting choral music performance in Nigeria. Others would quickly point to his many ‘Nollywood’ appearances and perhaps, accuse him of bastardizing or desecrating traditional institutions by mounting the stage to conduct his chorale or accepting roles in “Nollywood” despite his position as a royal father and a custodian of his peoples traditions.

The present paper is not out to discuss people’s perceptions, animosity or grouses with Laz. Ekwueme, but to find out his contributions to musical scholarship and performances in Nigeria. The following questions are therefore, pertinent to this study: (a) What is the place of Laz. Ekwueme in the history of music scholarship in Nigeria? (b) Are there significant contributions to the development of Nigerian art music by Laz. Ekwueme? (c) To what extent has Laz. Ekwueme aided the promotion of musical performances in Nigeria? (d) What are the efforts of Ekwueme at institutionalising and entrenching the study of music in Nigerian schools? (e) Are there humanistic philosophies and approaches in his contributions to musical scholarship?

This study will be driven by the aforementioned and other relevant questions and it will attempt to proffer answers to them by engaging in discussions under three main subheadings: (a) Academic output (b) Creative works and (c) Musical performances.

ACADEMIC OUTPUT

Prof. Lazarus Ekwueme is a first class scholar, researcher and trail blazer in the field of musicology. His 1972 Ph.D thesis on Ibo choral music is a masterpiece in that area of African musicology and has remained a reference material for many researchers since then. His academic output include: contributions in journals, textbooks, lecture notes, manuscripts, interviews both in print and electronic media that are not just concentrated in his area of specialisation but, he also veered into other fields of learning such as English language, culture, drama and so on.

Laz., has written important textbooks which are still being use by students of music and music scholars such as; modal counterpoint, conducting for Africans and two volumes of his academic papers published in book form. His tutelage and studentship under some of the best teachers available in the music field at that time such as; composition with Gordon Jacob, conducting under Adrian Boult, singing with Mark Raphael and choir training under Richard Latham and studentship at the prestigious Yale University United States of America had helped in shaping his academic training and musicianship.

CREATIVE WORKS

Despite his busy academic schedules, Ekwueme is able to create time to write musical compositions not just limited to his Igbo tradition but, also those that cut across art music- vocal and instrumental - as well as in sacred and secular forms. Some of these musical compositions are master pieces that have been performed both at home and

abroad. They include: Missa Africana, A Night in Bethlehem, Concerino in Re, Rhapsody Nigeriana, Hombe (Kenyan Folk Song), Beware (Negro Spiritual), Zidata Mo Nso nke Gi, Nwa n' akwa akwa, Elimeli, Nne n'ekunwa, Obi Dimkpa, Ote nkwa, Moslem chant and others too numerous. These are regarded as constituting the pinnacle of Nigerian choral music. According to Ogunnaike (1986):

Professor Ekwueme's training as a singer and choral musician is evident in his creative output. His choral works are skillfully crafted to suit individual voice parts, to follow the tonal rhythmic implications of the text and to produce an overall pleasing choral sonority (Ogunnaike, 1986:35).

Ekwueme has reflected humanistic tendencies in his creative works. His compositions can be performed by different categories of performers – from the village choirs, the city choirs, amateur and professional choirs as well as instrumentalists, as he has written compositions, which meet different technical demands for all of them. As part of his effort at promoting the indigenous music of his people, the Igbo, he has shown great craftsmanship as he creatively infuses their folk melodies into his vocal and instrumental compositions.

MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

Lazarus Ekwueme, is a performer per excellence who has mentored many Nigerian musicologists and aided the formation of many performing groups. His major performing platform is the famous “Laz Ekwueme Chorale.” The chorale has travelled through the length and breath of Nigeria, performing at important state functions and occasions ably conducted by Prof. Laz. Aside from local performances, some international performances

have also been undertaken by the group such as; at the Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting (CHOGM), and world choral festival in the United States of America. Prof. Laz also did solo recitals around the country promoting art music in various institutions offering music in the 1980s and 1990s with his able-accompanist, Late Richard Bucknor at the piano. (This writer was opportuned to attend his concert at the Polytechnic Ibadan as a young student in 1987).

He was also the major consultant to the Nigerian Choir and Orchestra (NICO) which was under the auspices of Prof. Jerry Gana and Late Mrs. Stella Obasanjo. Ogunnaike further stated that:

Professor Ekwueme has performed with, directed and founded numerous choirs in Nigeria and abroad and was chosen to direct the Nigerian National Choir for Festac '77. He has taken part in numerous dramatic presentations, written as a music critic, and broadcast various television and radio programs on choral and African music. His scholarly work has been published in many international journals (dealing primarily with the Theory of African Music). His work as a composer includes a long list of choral pieces, a chamber opera, some instrumental works and several solo songs (Ogunnaike, 1986:35).

Prof. Ekwueme is a music director and conductor extra-ordinaire whose likeness for perfection and precision cannot be questioned. Many choral conductors have taken after him using his interpretational ability and organisational acumen as a model for their group.

CONCLUSION

We have discussed in this paper the contributions of Laz. Ekwueme to music scholarship in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. Ekwueme's place in the annals of Nigerian music scholarship cannot be overemphasized as he epitomizes artistic excellence and the summit of academic attainments in that field of learning. This study opined that, upcoming scholars should emulate Lazarus Ekwueme and use him as a worthy model and that other Nigerian composers and musicologists should publish their academic papers and compositions to expand the frontiers of knowledge about Nigerian and African music.

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APPENDIX I



Prof. Laz. Ekwueme Conducting His Choral Group. (Photograph Courtesy of Sunday Sun).

APPENDIX II

This concert in
commemoration of
the visit to
Nigeria of the
Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, is
sponsored by the French Cultural
Centre, under the directorship of
M. Jean Francoise Roederer, at the
Embassy of the Republic of France,
No. 1, Queen's
Drive, Ikoyi,
Lagos, by kind
courtesy of His
Excellency Ambas-
sador Plattard.

THE
LAZ EKWUEME NATIONAL CHORALE
presents
A CONCERT OF SACRED MUSIC
in commemoration of
the visit to Nigeria of
HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
Tuesday, February 16, 1982
at 8.00 p.m.

THE
LAZ EKWUEME NATIONAL CHORALE

Soprano:

ADEGBITE, Carol
AKINKUGBE, Femi
AKPORE, Stella
AWOKOYA, Olutoyin
NWANKWO, Bernice
OKOROH, Ori Enyi
SCHILLER, Timi
SOMADE, Ibiwonke

Alto:

EKWUEME, Lucy
LAWSON, Anani
ODUSANYA, Gbenga
OKAFOR, Patricia
ONWUKWE, Gloria
SOKOROMO, Abadere

Tenor:

IKE, Nkemefule
IROKA, Ifeanyi
JOHNSON, Libere
MACDONALD, Gabriel
OGUNBAMERU, Olubi
ORAKA, Albert
OSHINULU, Tunde

Bass:

ALAJA-BROWNE, Afolabi
BANKOLE, Soji
BUCKNOR, Richard
EDER, Alan
NAYO, Nicholas
NWOKEDI, Emeka
OMOLE, Ebenezer

Sample Program of Laz. Ekwueme's Choral.