

# THE NEED FOR MUSICAL LITERACY IN NIGERIA

*Godwin Ogar*

## **Abstract**

The traditional music of a people is the embodiment of all the culture and tradition inherent in that society. This is perhaps so because music reflects and portrays the way of life of a people. Therefore, the extent to which the musical traditions are cherished, preserved and passed on determines the continuity of such traditions. This paper discusses the traditional musical literacy in Nigeria and its limitations in the context of contemporary national culture, examines music education in (he traditional setting, as well as in the secondary schools. The paper also examines the problems confronting musical literacy, proposes the way forward and recommends practical solutions to these problems. It suggests the need to take the knowledge about Nigerian traditional music beyond the traditional setting. The paper is of the opinion that the teaching of music should be integrated within the general scope of contemporary educational system in Nigeria with emphasis on traditional music which is more relevant to us. Inn!y, this paper examines the problems of music education in Nigeria mid suggests ways of educating the individual mind and the society at large through the promotion of musical literacy.

## **Introduction**

The art of making music in Nigeria is a way of life which has been relegated to a position of non-relevance as a result of contact with western civilization. Today, the average Nigerian does not feel at home with traditional music ;is with European influenced music. This is because colonial mentality has promoted western music and de-emphasized traditional music. The way music is taught in Nigerian schools has not helped the situation as it does not make the African child to have a reasonable level of appreciation for traditional music.

Traditional setting refers to areas in which traditional practices are still adhered to despite contact with the European culture. Traditional setting also refers to the rural areas, where western influence is still at its lowest level. Traditional music is still in existence even in some areas that have become urbanized and overwhelmed by western civilization. The paper makes a case for musical literacy in Nigeria, examines the problems associated with musical literacy in Nigeria, proposes the solutions and recommends practical steps aimed at increasing awareness for traditional music and its literacy in Nigeria.

## **Music Education in the Traditional Setting**

Musicians go through a process of training in order to attain mastery of whatever type of music they choose to practice. It may be singing, playing of instrument or dancing. The training of a musician in the traditional setting is both formal and informal. Formal training requires a specific period of training and apprenticeship to a music teacher or musician. This period of apprenticeship also requires certain terms for the training of the trainees. Musical training can also be informal when there is no conventional school setting, timetable documented course content, assessment and certification. In informal training, learning is done by practical and physical participation over a period of time. In informal training success is measured by performance and dexterity. Nkeha (2002) tells us that exposure to musical situations and participation are emphasized more than formal teaching.

In Yoruba land, for instance, a child is incorporated into the musical tradition of the land. As a citizen of the community, he takes part in various socio-musical activities which range from non-ritual events such as moonlight games and marriage ceremonies to rites of passage, consisting of naming, initiation, marriage, farming and funeral ceremonies. Omojola (2000) asserts that each of these occasions requires different tone, drumming and lyrics. A trainee, therefore, needs to be conversant with each ceremony and ensures that he does not play a burial music during naming ceremonies. Similarly, in Yala, a trainee whose father is a drummer learns to play drum or whatever musical

instrument that runs in the blood of that family.

In Yala world view, the process of music education is illustrated using the training given to trainees in the popular "Akataka" music. This type of music is a traditional vocal music found among the people of Yala in Cross River State of Nigeria. It is a music that provides, among others, information, entertainment and education. It is also a war-like music danced to only by brave men and warriors. A trainee has to learn the chanting and chorusing of the music. Besides, he has to beat the drum, "Ogene", wooden gong, flute and the horn to match the dancing steps of the dancers.

Ijato (2001) tells us that the willingness of a trainee to enter into training is communicated to a master musician of his choice. This however, is not until after consultation with the Alphas on the intended career to be sure whether he is destined to be in that profession. This, according to Na'Allah (1988), is rooted in the Yoruba belief about destiny. There is no specific age limit as to who could enroll for apprenticeship. Whoever will be enrolled must, however, be knowledgeable enough to understand what he will be taught and to communicate effectively with his master. The trainee is expected to get very close to the leader because an apprentice in "Akataka" is not only expected to learn the musical art, he is also to acquire the ideas and philosophies of his master.

A new trainee begins merely as a follower and observer at performances. He often stays with the chorus team to observe their activities and sings along with them. The trainee also helps to custody some of the instruments, cleans and dries them in the sun. He joins the chorus for group performance as soon as he is certified by the head of the chorus group to have understood the art of singing and drumming. As he masters the art, the trainee moves up the ladder in hierarchy until he attains the post of a head of the chorus which is next to the highest post a follower could attain. According to Kajohjoh (1993), this post is similar to the post of the assistant group leader in conventional music school. After a couple of years of training or apprenticeship, the trainee is released by the master musician to establish his own band of music.

The process of educating a trainee cuts across the Nigerian musical practices with some slight variations. The training is mostly carried out by observation and participation. The basic entry requirement is interest in music. Nketia (1974) tells us that instructions are given by words of mouth on the musical tradition that last some years. The verbal nature of training has made traditional music to lose its originality because of the variations brought into it in the course of passing its tenets from one generation to another. The understanding of such musical traditions and the principles guiding their performance has also become vague because there is no proper documentation and preservation of the wordings, rites, and artistry. Since there cannot be documentation without musical literacy, the traditional music training has suffered greatly from the threat of extinction.

### **The Nigerian Secondary School Experience**

The introduction of music in the curriculum of Nigerian secondary schools is a welcome development towards music literacy in Nigeria. However, it is not all the secondary schools that teach music as a subject. According to Ogar (1996), only about six out of the twenty-three secondary schools teach music in Yala Local Government Area. Even these schools that have music on the school's timetable, only three have trained teachers in music. The teaching of music in these six schools is tailored along western concept of music. Most of these schools have mostly western musical instruments and few of traditional instruments. Those schools that have traditional instrument do not have standardized method and materials for instructions. Abua (1992) sees the classical sonata, pop, reggae, jazz and other western musical works as mirrors through which Nigerian traditional music and instruments are examined, thus the orientation of the students or trainees are geared towards western music than African.

Mary Knoll College, Okuku-Yala is one of such schools where music is taught. The formal instruction of music in this college began a couple of years ago. Before this period in question, musical activities were encouraged by the school authorities. Music was made a compulsory subject for senior secondary school one and two. The only teacher who holds a diploma in music is saddled with the responsibility of teaching five streams of SSS one and two, making about four hundred students. The syllabus is tailored along western music theories e.g. the lines, spaces, triads, scales, choruses, rhyming and history of western music with no reference to traditional music. When the teacher was transferred from Mary Knoll, the school had no music teacher any longer. The school now

depends on youth corpsers or instructors who did not read music as a discipline to teach music to students. The music department has the following musical instruments: two guitars, one wooden gong, one iron gong, one trumpet, one flute, one alto saxophone and one mega-phone.

The other traditional music is however not taught because the instructors are not available so the school has more of trumpeters, guitarists and organists. The school has staged a number of musical concerts which are western oriented. The music activities in this school illustrate the prominence given to the western type of music at the expense of traditional music. This practice has adversely affected music literacy in Nigeria.

### **Problems Confronting Musical Literacy**

Some of the problems militating against musical literacy in Nigeria include the lack of qualified teachers, dearth of textbooks and instructional materials, attitude of school authorities and students, western cultural influence etc,

#### **1) Lack of Qualified Teachers**

Until recently, it was only Theatre Arts Departments in some Nigerian universities that teach dance drama and choreography to theatre art students. The only Nigerian universities that established music as department was the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. It ran courses that lead to award of diplomas only and very few graduates have been produced since its establishment. This has affected the production of qualified manpower which the schools need to teach secondary school students interested in studying music. The consequence is that most Nigerian post-primary schools had no trained teachers in music. If schools had no qualified teachers in music, it therefore stands to reason that music cannot be included among the subjects taught to students in our secondary schools. The absence of qualified teachers has been a militating factor against music literacy. In attempt to address this situation, a few secondary schools recruited instructors or co-opted youth corpsers to teach music to students. This meant that these schools had no regular staff employed to teach music to students in secondary schools. The absence of qualified and trained music teachers ultimately affected the teaching and learning of music in our secondary schools as the few that registered for music in O/Level examination performed poorly.

#### **2) Dearth of Texts and Instructional Materials**

The lack of resource persons in music also adversely affected the availability of written literature in all the units of music. Some libraries had manuals like sacred songs and solos, hymns for Catholic and monographs containing the lyrics of music of artists like Bob Marley, James Brown, Lucky Dube, Ralph Cameroon, Sunny Okosun, Onyeka Onwenu and Chris Okotie. Some of these literatures were produced by Onitsha market publishers and had no references. The end results are that courses mounted in secondary schools curricula were mostly introductory and historical in content. The articulation of, composition of and construction of music were gaze works enacted on the spur of the moment. There were hardly any theoretical framework to guide the teachers who teach music in the few schools where music is taught. The dearth of textbooks apart, there were little or no instructional materials in most of the schools that had music on their subject timetable. Instructors relied on improvised drawings or pictures seen on the pages of newspapers. This affected the practical sessions of music classes in those schools. The end result is that both teachers and students had little or nothing to fall back on as instructional materials. Teaching and learning were mostly theoretical and little-practical. Therefore the graduates from these schools hurriedly abandoned the idea of pursuing music to first degree levels due to the absence of books and instructional materials.

#### **3) Attitude of Parents, Authorities and Learners**

Some parents felt that there was little or no gain in making a career out of music. This is because" musicians were seen as irresponsible persons who were too superficial in their appearance and conducts. Musicians were also perceived as smokers, drunks and those who love to be in the company of red lip girls. God-fearing parents became wary in encouraging their children to read music in schools. The cost of acquiring musical instruments after graduation was too exorbitant and made the practice of music on graduation a difficult dream to realize. Some of these learners, who; would have been great musicians, felt shy and sought for careers in other disciplines. The colonial masters as well as missionaries did not go beyond the primary level of music when they came to. Africa. They trained choristers to sing during religious programmes and did not bother to grant scholarship for learners

interested in music. Learners on the other hand were interested in pursuing careers in medicine, law, education and politics. This meant that emphasis was placed on these so called prestigious disciplines and fewer premiums on music and other art related courses. Therefore the attitude of parents, colonialists, missionary and learners adversely affected the teaching and learning of music in our secondary schools.

### **Solutions to the Problems Affecting Music Literacy in Nigeria**

To solve the problems affecting the teaching and learning of music requires concerted efforts from parents, learners, teachers, educationists, government and non-governmental agencies. Since the training of a musician is shrouded by a number of problems, every interested party has to contribute his quota to the success of music literacy in Nigerian secondary schools. Most people have their first formal contact in the secondary school where resource persons and facilities were not readily available. To address these problems, educationists could make the teaching and learning of music a compulsory subject for all students who study arts and humanities in schools.

Secondly, the inferiority complex associated with traditional music could be eroded with time if the Department of Information and National Orientation re-orientate the masses. Religious ceremonies, marriage, child naming etc should select traditional pieces and be proud of these pieces just as they view western music. Government could enact decrees banning further importation of western music. Mass media, journalists, dramatists, movie industries should be encouraged to play and educate our youths on the usefulness of traditional music.

Although the training of music educators has been predominantly western; educationists and authorities should make conscious effort to detach western music from any school ceremony. All public and private schools should adopt traditional music during morning and afternoon assemblies. Artist like Akin Fuba, have attempted to capture the essence of our traditional music in their works by lifting it from the traditional setting to a position that could be appreciated as a contemplative music.

Another solution is documentation and preservation of traditional music. The records of western music, who lived many centuries in Europe are available today because they were transmissible as valid document. A proper labeling and documentation of our traditional music will not only preserve our music for prosperity but will also become a heritage for generations unborn. Non-governmental agencies should play a vital role in raising awareness among Nigerian secondary school students.

### **Recommendations**

- 1) Ability to obtain a pass in music in secondary school certificate should be a condition for admission in Arts and humanities in Universities.
- 2) Limited liability companies and multi-national co-operations like the oil and gas industries should contribute a minimal of ½ % of their profit into the training and acquisition of facilities for music literacy.
- 3) Ability to sing or dance to a piece of traditional music should be a condition for gainful employment into public service.
- 4) Music education should be introduced to pupils right from nursery school to university level with emphasis on understanding the forms and structures of traditional music and notation.
- 5) Newspapers and journals should publish articles that discuss traditional music and; nil the elements that go with it.
- 6) Researchers and scholars should get to the rural areas where these music exist in their, natural settings and document them as first hand information,
- 7) Scholarship should be awarded to interested teachers and students to do further research in music.
- 8) Government should allocate special grants to institutions to establish music Departments.

### **Conclusion**

This paper shows that there is every need to encourage musical literacy in Nigeria. Governments, parents, educationists as well as non-governmental have a role to play in promoting musical literacy in secondary schools in Nigeria. The problems affecting music literacy can be solved if

special grant is allocated to institutions to establish departments of music and give scholarship to teachers and students to carry out researches in music. The paper also believes that the department of National Orientation and the mass media can equally contribute their quota to the creation of awareness in traditional music.

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