

THE EFFICACY OF GOSPEL MUSIC IN THE UNITY CHURCH, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Since creation music and religion have been inseparable from each other. In Nigeria experience has shown that gospel music has been the livewire of many Christian churches, crusades, revivals, evangelisms and oilier events. In spite of these vital attributes, one still wonders why gospel music has not received adequate academic attention particularly in the Unity Church in Nigeria with over one thousand undocumented gospel songs; most of which were indigenously composed without "Notation" or "Key Signature". In view of this, the researcher made an in-depth study of gospel music and its importance to the Unity Church and Christians at large. Finally, some useful suggestions were made on how to improve gospel music for the benefit of the church, Christians and music scholars worldwide.

Introduction

Since creation, music and religion has been inseparable from each other. Traditionally, music is a great force in evoking the gods as noted by Nketia in Euba (1986:15) when he asserted that gods are supposed to be sensitive to the language of music and would come down to see "their children" if they heard the music they liked". In the Islamic religious circle, music plays a dominant role. Though there is no formal singing and drumming in the mosque, music according to Euba (1986:13), which is in the form of "Cantillation" is used as "call for worship" and for a number of Islamic ceremonial events; ranging from awakening the fasting Moslems up for morning meal, to welcoming the returning pilgrims from (Hajj) the holy land.

In the Christian liturgy, there were many instances where references were made of music. For example, Psalm 150: verses 3-5 of King James Version Bible, spoke of "giving praises to God with sounding timbrel, trumpet, cymbals, string instruments and organ". Other instances include the songs of the Angels in the book of Revelation (Rev. 5: 9-10 and various Apostolic songs in the New Testament (e.g. Paul's song in 1st Cor. 14:15). Furthermore, Clarke (1935:237) quoted a Baptist Minister who had preached for nearly fifty years in rural South Carolina as saying: "I'd rather have good music in my church any time than a good sermon; it has more lasting spiritual value". Even J.S. Bach of the Baroque period was quoted as saying: "The aim and final reason of all music should be nothing else but the "Glory of God" and the refreshment of Spirit" (Machills, 1990). These and more instances clearly reveal that music is often seen as the best method and fastest means of reaching God/gods and activating Him into performance.

Purpose of the Study

In the Christian world of today, the search for righteousness and salvation through Christ has led to a wide spread of gospel messages and Christian doctrines through gospel music. In Nigeria, experience has shown that gospel music has been the livewire of many Christian churches, crusades, revivals, evangelisms and other events since the advent of the European missionaries. In spite of these potential authorities, especially in the so called "Pentecostal Churches, one still wonders why this aspect of music has not received adequate academic; particularly in the "Unity Church" in Nigeria with over one thousand undocumented gospel songs; most of which were indigenously composed without "Notation": or "Key Signature". This situation though not peculiar to the Unity Church but to other Pentecostal and Gospel Band Groups in Nigeria, has therefore prompted the writer into this aspect of research with the Unity Church, Aba as a centre of focus.

Significance of the Study

This research, which involved a historical survey approach, is the first of its kind in the Unity Church throughout Nigeria. The work would be of immense benefit to both members of the church in that:

- 1) It would throw more light on the need for compilation and documentation of these spiritually activating songs of the Unity Churches into book form for easy remembrance and usage within

- and outside the Unity Church services.
- 2) It would also be of great benefit to other music scholars that may be interested in undertaking a more detailed research or studies in gospel music.
 - 3) Finally, it would create more business opportunities to publishers and media organizations through whom the potentialities inherent in the music would be manifested worldwide.

The Origin of Gospel Music

Gospel music was originally a type of Afro-American religious music whose performing style is associated with the musical traditions of West African ethnic groups. According to Sadie (1992:554), "Gospel music relates mostly to the plantation "shouts" or "ring-dances of African origin in which 'stamping and singing' while moving in a circle or anti-clockwise in loose-limbed, shuffling dance was characteristics". William-Jones (1975:375) in line with the above, stated that:

The consistent and persistent retention in gospel music performance and practice of a clearly defined black identity growing out of the black experience in America is indicative of the indomilability of the African ethos.

The music, which is associated with the development of Pentecostal Churches, embraces both the music of street evangelism and that of preacher-singers. Some of the founders and earlier composers of gospel music were Dwight Lyman Moody (1837:99) and Ira David Sankey (1840:1908). They led the first big gospel revivals during the reconstruction of America after the American civil war in 1870's. According to Sadie (1990:550), Moody preaches while Sankey sings the gospel and accompanies himself with reed organ during their evangelism missions. The outcome of these evangelical trips led to the compilation and publication of Sacred Song and Solos by Sankey in 1873.

Development of Unity Church in Nigeria

Unity Church was first established in Missouri-Mississippi in United States of America by "Vegetarians" - Rev. and Mrs. Charles Fillmore in 1889 and eventually found its root in Nigeria in 1926 by late Rev. Awa Njoku from Elu Ohafia in Abia State. Its Headquarters in Nigeria is at Uzuakoli in Bende Local Government Area of Abia State. The Church whose "Daily Word" prayer books are circulated worldwide, is one of the earliest Pentecostal Churches in the Eastern part of this country. Some early members of this faith pulled out from some orthodox Churches established by the missionaries within the South-Eastern part of the country where this Unity Church is predominantly found.

An oral interview with a prominent member of the Unity Church - Mr. E.O. Ukaegbu of the Chemistry Department, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, whose late father was the former life President of the Church in Nigeria (1965-1999), confirmed that his late father - Snr. Rev. J.U. Eke and a host of others such as elder James Igara, Mazi Akpala Agwu, Okpo Ituma, Rev. Heart (Teacher Heart) etc, left the then "Primitive Methodist" church in Item as a result of the powerful healing faith inherent in the Unity Church's gospel songs and mode of prayers. Besides, members were usually referred to as "vegetarians" in that they forbid meat and use of drugs as laid down to them by the founders of the church in America. They strongly believe in the efficacy of prayers and the gospel songs which serve as the activator of the soul. A good example of this is seen in a Unity Book - Life of prayer which stated "if we are meditating on the idea of life, we may find it necessary to deny the unreality of illness, weakness, or death. We then begin to affirm the truth that God is life; that He is the source of all life..." (Foundations of Unity, series Two Vol. 2, 103). It was through some of these early converts of Item, Abiriba and Ohafia that Unity Church reached Aba. By the mid sixties, the church had grown in strength within Aba and other towns in Eastern and Western parts of Nigeria as could be seen in the attached photocopy of the Daily Word Book (see Appendix 7).

Gospel Music in the Unity Church, Aba

Aba is one of the strongest seats of the Unity Church in Nigeria. In an oral interview with Reverend A.K. Okorie, the Unity Church Nigeria was established at Aba in 1933. Since then, the Church has been known for her beautiful treasure of gospel songs, which form a repertoire of her daily songs of worship. These chorus songs often referred to as 'prayer fuel' are of vital importance since the church does not believe in the use of the so called "Western orthodox" hymns and canticles. A good number of their songs were

composed in Igbo texts by late Rev. Awa Njoku - the founder of the church in Nigeria.

The Song Texts

The nature of these gospel choruses, which were mainly drawn from the Bible verses and prayer books, depends on the event or circumstance surrounding the worshippers. There are multiplicity of songs for various events and situations as it is in the orthodox churches. For example, there are songs for affirmation of faith, expression of joy, victory over trials and temptations, songs of protection, songs that preach the sermon, songs of hope and expectations, songs of praise, songs of deliverance, songs of gratification and for other spiritual and social events in the Unity Church. Some of these songs have both Igbo and English versions while others are specifically in Igbo or English as would be seen in the appendices. However, English translations of those in Igbo texts were made for proper understanding of the music.

The Structure of the Gospel Songs of Unity Church, Aba

Generally, the structure of Unity Church gospel songs unlike the art song arrangements or hymn singing/psalm chanting practices of the orthodox churches which actively and deliberately incorporated European classical music concepts and practices, have not consciously sought the assimilation of the European religious practices or materials into its genre. Even where such occurs, the materials and styles are often improvisationally recreated to conform with the church's ethics and mode of worship. The style of composition and performance practices is deeply based on African idioms. The early converts' inability to read music staff or solfa notation, coupled with their low educational status, hindered them from complete adoption of the American practice which involves the use of structured gospel hymn books such as the "Unity Song of Selections" and "Wings of Songs", accompanied with orchestral band instruments (See Appendix 6).

It was on this ground that the need for indigenous creativity arose. This resulted to a multiplicity of gospel choruses that are presently in use throughout Unity Churches in Nigeria. Apart

from these indigenous works, a good number of short and simple melodic times were often added to some of the American monthly "Daily Word" prayer guides which are printed by the Church's Headquarters in Missouri, U.S.A. Example of this is in Appendix 6 and 7 respectively.

Sometimes, some of these prayer-song compositions are translated into vernacular texts for the convenience of those who could not afford to sing in English. This is why songs Nos. i & iv of the appendix are written in both English and Igbo versions, which clearly confirm the general trends in the indigenisation of Western hymns as Nnamani (2001:57) rightly remarked:

The church had been a creative one pioneering, exploring, reinforcing, renovating and restructuring itself especially in the area of music, in order to meet the yearnings and aspirations of the **people**.

However, it might be of interest to know that a host of these indigenous songs originated at the Unity Church, Aba, with the highest number of worshippers.

The style of composition is simple, with short melodic and rhythmic motives, usually in duple, triple or quadruple time as could be seen from the musical examples in the appendices. Even though there is no form of "call-and-response" or "solo/refrain" structures which often characterised most of the early American black gospel music, the song texts are however, poetic with single theme which is emphasized through repetitions and slight modifications in the second and third line in order to achieve complete phrases. This is in accordance with Sadie's (1992:557) remark that: "Traditionally, the black gospel song has a simple structure with lines that are frequently repeated". The continuous repetition of the entire song as many times as the leader may desire, often makes for easy memorization, moreover, they are not documented or compiled in a book form.

Therefore, members of this congregation perceive these songs like the British unwritten constitution which is hardly forgotten once learnt.

Mode of Learning the Songs

Rote method is still considered as the easiest means of learning these songs since most of the worshippers cannot read written music. Secondly, the absence of a well-defined key structure makes the

entire songs free of chromatics which should have formed the basis for modulations. This technique of composition is akin to the late Harcourt Whyte in the early sixties. Sidran (1971:47), in the same situation observed that:

The ability to perform music at the peak of emotional involvement, to be able to maintain the pitch of this involvement, and continue the process of spontaneous composition separates black entertainment from almost all of Western tradition.

The singing technique depicts some elements of African musical traditions in that all members of the church virtually sing in unison, and collectively repeating the song over and over again till the signal bell for final stop is heard (Appendix 2(A) Music). In spite of the absence of keys, the lead-singers who usually give the tune and tempo of the song, hardly encounter problem of extreme high or low pitching in the course of presentation. The entire process of singing is more of oral tradition, passing from one generation to another with little or no modification. This process complies to William-Jones (1975:375) conclusive remarks that "since gospel music is transmitted primarily through oral tradition, it is necessary to define this genre in the context of the black gospel church".

Mode of Performance

The significant effect of instrumental accompaniments to the gospel songs of the Unity Church is a case in point. At the inception of the Church at Umuahia, the songs were unaccompanied (accapella) and limited only to rhythmic accompaniments by means of hand-clapping/wooden clapper, swinging and foot stamping which was initially the practice in America.

By the time of its establishment at Aba, the introduction of traditional African instruments such as the wooden slit drums (ufue), pot drum (udu) rattles (osha or oyo), metal gongs (ogene) and a bell (rngbaringba) were already in progress. These accompanying instruments were improvised at the expense of the Western instruments which were out of reach and knowledge of the new converts. These instruments were purely percussive; being entirely of idiophone family.

In 1995, the introduction of some Western instruments such as the electronic organ, tambourines, jazz drum set, microphones, speakers and amplifier to amplify and create strong rhythmic background, made the songs more enjoyable and stimulating to the congregations of the church. Hence, instrumental accompaniments and the inspiring tunes of the songs which are deeply rooted in Africanism, serve as the oil that lubricates and drives the entire music deep down into the inner most hearts of the worshippers. A good number of converts who would not have continued with the church due to abstinence from meat consumption, found it difficult to resist the efficacy and spiritual joy inherent in the church's mode of instrumentation. During ceremonies and other Christian events such as harvests in which the church is often invited, one sometimes observes that congregations from other invited churches often abandon their stand to dance with the Unity once they begin to perform (e.g. listen to last music. Appendix 8(A)). In justification of this assertion, Sydnor (1960:17) remarked that... "many strangers have been irresistibly attracted to a particular congregation because the members very clearly had a vital faith and joyfully proclaimed it in song".

Mode of Dance

Unlike the Afro-American gospel dance pattern which involves shouting, babblings, involuntary cries and perspiring which eventually leads to trance, the dance pattern of the Unity Church throughout Nigeria is more of passionately fast shuffling of the legs and swaying of the body as well as hands in expression of their feelings and mood in accordance with the texts and rhythm of the music. The dance is usually in a circular formation and anti-clockwise direction, which is similar to the black gospel groups in America. The beginnings of these songs are often accompanied with hand clapping, followed by the instrumentation and finally dance. It is usually a thing of joy to be associated with the Unity Church dance/prayers due to its powerful spiritual effects (e.g. Appendix 8(A)). Apart from a few innovations coupled with the introduction of the Unity songs of selections in Aba, Lagos, Ibadan, Port Harcourt and Umuahia centres, the pattern of worship and performance has remained fairly static in most other local

branches throughout Nigeria.

In spite of this static trends, a good number of instrumentation have gradually found their way into spiritual vineyards of many churches and Gospel Band Groups with high level of modifications. This perception is similar to that of Omibiyi-Obidike (1994:6) who observed that gospel music originally used in the church at special festivals such as Harvest, Thanksgivings, etc was taken out of the confines of the church in view of the need for youths to have the type of music that caters for their social interest.

Consequently, Sadie (1992:557) expressed the same experience about a small group like the Staple Singers from Mississippi who had "produced a steady flow of records, and stimulated the formation of local groups in every store-front and wayside clapboard church, even infiltrating the larger, more orthodox and the Baptist churches". A good number of these gospel music are now performed virtually in all Christian events such as weddings, birthdays, child dedications/naming ceremonies, funerals, in the buses, schools, markets places, homes, media houses etc. in addition to its usual functions during Christian worships.

Impact of the Music in the Unity Church, Aba

The role of gospel music in the Unity Church, Aba cannot be underestimated especially in the socio-religious life of its members and other adherents of the gospel.

In the first instance, it is looked upon as the blood stream of the Christian gospel in which its name is derived. A vast of Biblical messages from "Genesis to Revelation" are summarily compartmentalized through gospel music to meet various spiritual needs of man. This is the case with the gospel music of the Unity Church, Aba which touches virtually all sections of the Holy Bible. A good example of this is the second song in this work - "Mu onwem bu uzo na-ezi okwu, na ndu" (I am the way, the truth and the life) derived from Christ's teaching in John 8:11-12.

Secondly, it prepares the ground for atonement with God Almighty and at the same time places the congregation in the right mood for worship or prayers. This aspect of gospel music found in large number in the Unity Church songs is often referred to as "call - for - worship" songs or 'praise and worship' songs in many orthodox and Pentecostal churches. Such music accelerates worshipers' emotional feelings and love for God the creator. Examples of this aspect of gospel music of the Unity Church, Aba are songs Nos. six, eleven and twelve in this work. They instill courage, humility and gives sense of belonging as one body in Christ Jesus.

Thirdly, it is a catalyst of the scripture in that it readily conveys the gospel messages to the grass root. This is due to intrinsic and the explicit simplicity of its short melodic motives, repetitive theme, memorable texts, rhythmic effects and style of instrumentation, which optimistically appeal to its numerous consumers within and outside the Unity Church. The simpler and shorter the song texts, the deeper and faster the rate of assimilation. Virtually, all the examples of songs used in this work possess these attributes.

Furthermore, gospel music in the Unity Church with particular reference to Aba centre has multifunctional attributes. It is often addressed as a preacher of the sermon, a teacher of the gospel truth, a great evangelist, a moral counsellor, a re-builder of physical and spiritual weakness of man, revivalist, a re-activator of confidence and faith; especially at the time of trouble and confusion, a source of joy to the needy and oppressed, prayer stimulator, a cultivator of hope and expectations during trials and tribulations etc. All these principles of life are often accomplished in Christian life through the gospel music.

Therefore, it is in view of these that members of the Unity Church strongly believe that they are never moved by the things of this world as long as their hope for the life hereafter supercedes things of this early world. According to Fillmore (1949:68), "we know that our home is not altogether on earth but also in the air, over which we must gain dominion before we can have a fit dwelling place". This is one of the reasons why the Unity Church holds firm to their doctrines.

Recommendations

Although a lot of changes have occurred in the present day gospel music performance worldwide, much still needs to be accomplished to improve on the style of singing and instrumentation particularly in the Unity Church, Aba and its branches throughout Nigeria. The use of modern sophisticated Western instruments should be artistically blended with the traditional instruments that are currently in use. This would in no small measure, improve its quality output as it is the practice in some neighbourhood churches and professional Band groups within and outside Aba metropolitan.

Furthermore, some of the traditional instruments in use should be modified to stand the present trends of practice. Such innovation might begin with the introduction of African xylophones graded and tuned with electric resonators attached to it just like the Koto instrument of the Asian and Arab countries. Such instrument could be skillfully used for melody or ornamentations as may be desired in the music. This would also elevate the status of our gospel music and make it purely African in origin.

Finally, it is disheartening to know that in spite of the awakening spirits of some gospel artistes/composers in recent time which spurred some media houses and recording companies to show more interest towards the success of gospel music in Nigerian music industry, adequate attention has not been given to this aspect of music in the educational sector which is supposed to be core of its developmental processes. In view of this therefore, it is expected that as soon as the interest of our music educators and researchers are directed towards documentations, publications and modification of the traditional approach to its performance in line with the modern trends of musical development, gospel songs of the Unity Church, Aba and even those of the neighbourhood churches and Band groups which have been explored, would then be of great relevance to the Christians, scholars and the public at large.

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LIT MUSIC

A PRAYER SONG FOR PROTECTION

EXAMPLE (i)

(IGBO & ENGLISH VERSIONS)

The chukwa gwera m gburugburu, Ihunanya chukw kwachiri m, Ebe
The light of God surrounds me, The love of God inspires me. Ebe
chukwu, n'icheketa m, O anyo chukwu, n'eleketa m. Ebe
Power of God protects me, The presence, watches over me. Where
gbula mu nwo chukwu nwo ya; Ebe gbula mu nwo chukwu nwo ya, Ebe
ever I am God is — Where ever I am God is —, where
gbula mu nwo chukwu nwo ya — Ebe gbula mu nwo chukwu nwo ya.
ever I am God is — Where ever I am God is. Amen.

EXAMPLE (ii)

(IGBO TEXT)

A Song that reflects on the teaching of Jesus Christ.

Mu onwemby yza na-ezi-owu, na ndu, Mu onwemby ihe nke uwa,
Onye o bula ga-esom aghaghi aha uzo, O gaagwano n'echichiiri.

(English Translation) I am the way, the truth and the life.
I am the light of the world,
He that follows me shall see the light,
He shall not be in darkness. (John 8:11-12)

EXAMPLE (iii) A Prayer-Song for testing the healing power of God.

Holy Spirit within me — Heal me, heal me now —
Kiss me — now true and true, Bless me — eternally.

EXAMPLE 20 A Song of re-affirmation of faith.

Re-building power, re-building, re-building power, re-building power,
 re-building, re-build me a-new, re-building power, re-building
 re-building power re-build me, once a-gain.

(IGBO TEXT)
 Ike nwaughari, Ike nwaughari, Ike nwaughari.
 Ike nwaughari, Ike nwaughari, nwaugharia m ozo
 Ike nwaughari, Ike nwaughari, Ike nwaughari
 nwaughari-kwa m ozo.

EXAMPLE 21 A Song for God's healing.

(IGBO TEXT)

Ike na-awo oria, bu ike nke christ, Nna. gwom, gwom ugbu a;
 O. di bira uku nke. na-gwo oria dum nna gwom site na-aha christ.

(ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

The healing power which is of the christ
 Lord heal me, heal me now;
 You are great physician that heals all sicknesses,
 Lord heal me through the name of christ.

EXAMPLE (VI) A Song of Courage especially in time of fear and Tribulation.

(IGBO TEXT)

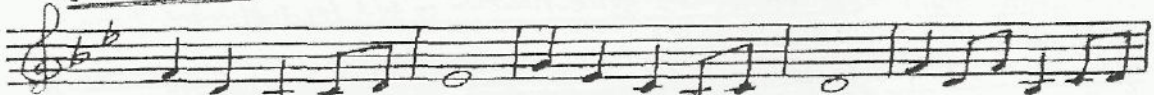


I je m n'ile, anaghim namim, Ma e na-esorom.

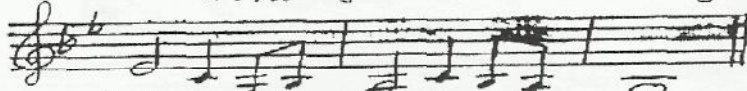
(ENGLISH TRANSLATION) In all my journey, I am not alone,
For He is with me.

EXAMPLE (VII) A Song of Victory especially in time of trials and affliction.

(IGBO TEXT)



Ga n'iru igalugbu - Ga n'iru igalugbu - Atukwala e -



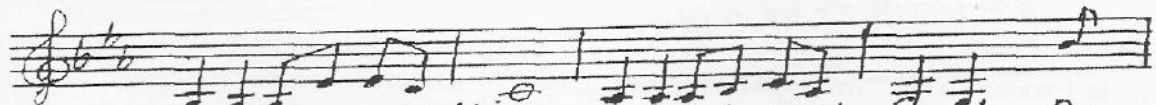
gwu, igalugbu, igalugbu.

(ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

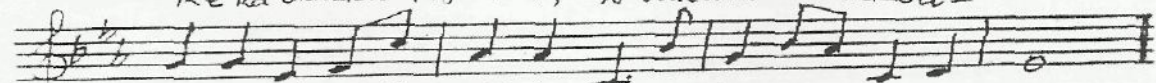
Ride on thou wilt conquer (2 times)
Be not afraid at all,
Thou wilt conquer, thou wilt conquer.

EXAMPLE (VIII) A Song for affirmation of faith.

(IGBO TEXT)



Ile ka Okwue apugh' ime, N'ime aha nke chukwu - 0 -



kwue puru igbanwe ihe dum, N'ime aha nke chukwu.

(ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

There's nothing faith cannot do,
In the name of God;
Faith can surely change all things
In the name of God.

EXAMPLE (ix) A Song of gratification to God
(IGBO TEXT)

Nye iganata, nye iganata, nye iganata
ta - oke uba, nke chukwu.

(ENGLISH TRANSLATION) Give you will receive (3 times)
Bounteous wealth of the Lord.
This song is usually for thanks-giving and church offerings.

EXAMPLE (x) A Song of gratification to God for fulfilment of needs
(IGBO TEXT)

Tee chukwu omezuruw nkpam n'ile, Ome ka ndu m ba n'ile

(ENGLISH TRANSLATION) Praise God, He has fulfilled all my needs
He made my life dwell in peace

EXAMPLE (xi) A Song of Praise to God.
(IGBO TEXT)

Bia soro nde nso bua abia, Bia soro ndi nso bua abia
eto christ n'aze n'ile, n'eto chukwu kwa abochi.

(ENGLISH TRANSLATION) Come join the Holy ones and sing (at)
Praising christ, in every thing.
Praising God every day.

EXAMPLE (xii) SONG OF HOPE:

My own shall come to me, my own shall come to me, Whatever
the world may say, whatever the world may do, my own shall come to me

