

The Contextual Sources of Laz Ekwueme's Music Compositions: Enhancing Creative Expressions

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Abstract

Every musical work is reflective of the composer's uniqueness or imitation of another's. As a result, composers' individuality reflects in the nature and quality of their compositions. This paper focuses on the contextual sources of the music compositions of Laz Ekwueme, a foremost Nigerian art music composer and notable scholar. It categorizes the composer's works and examines how contextual sources shape and enhance his creative expressions. These sources contribute to his numerous and eclectic musical works. Anchor of the paper is on the theory of creative ethnomusicology. The study relies on in-depth interviews held with the composer, collection of his compositions, and relevant literature. It reveals Ekwueme's contextual sources through, cultural influence of folklife during childhood and personal life experience of dreams or flashes. By listening to other composer's works, exposure to different musical styles is achieved and explored. He even draws inspiration from a song title, tune or melody of another's musical work. In addition is his desire for an African expression of a foreign musical piece heard, sometimes in his own language. Ekwueme's religion, biblical stories and emotions such as Passion time are worthy of note. Environment, natural sceneries, atmospheric conditions, political occurrence such as the Nigerian civil war are inclusive of the contextual sources. Special requests made for specified compositions through relationships had with people, also influences his mode of inspiration. The study concludes that a composer's alertness and attentiveness to diverse situations, play significant roles in activating and enhancing the nature and quality of their compositions.

***Keywords:* Laz Ekwueme, Contextual Sources, Music Compositions, Creative Expressions, Enhance.**

Introduction

Music compositions are influenced by factors which shape how a music piece is created, thus, the meaning of a musical composition and its significance would deeply be appreciated when the context surrounding the composition is understood. That which drives a composer to compose and the circumstance under which the composer is inspired, play significant role on the nature and quality of the composition. Laz Ekwueme affirms during a personal interview with the author in 2012, that, "various factors determine [his] composition". The inspiration behind a composition therefore becomes essential in studying and fully appreciating the creativity exhibited by the composer. This creativity is anchored on the contextual source of the composition.

Insight into the contextual sources of Laz Ekwueme's compositions thus provide deeper appreciation for his works, arousal of interest in his works and better interpretation in the performance of his works. Laz Ekwueme has written several choral works of diverse themes which are unique and impactful. His music reflects his personal experiences, understanding of his culture and history. Hardly could his uniqueness be mistaken for another composer's. His works are inspired under different contexts which this study has identified as enhancers to his creative expressions.

Laz Ekwueme's compositions can be regarded as exhibits of information gathered from his music research over the years. Upon his application of knowledge gathered, the theory of creative ethnomusicology, pioneered by Akin Euba (2001), forms the basis for this study. The theory states that a process whereby information obtained from music research is used in composition rather than as the basis of scholarly writing.

Ekwueme's compositional approach as inspired under various contextual sources, significantly activates and enhances his creative expressions of musical prowess. In shedding light on his kind of compositions, a categorization of collections of his works is done, beginning broadly from how compositions by western trained African composers have been classified and then narrowed down to his categories of musical works. The paper highlights and examines the contextual sources upon which his compositions are inspired.

Categorization of African Art Music Compositions

Attempts have been made by different scholars in categorizing the works of African composers who have received western music training abroad, one of whom is Laz Ekwueme. Two types of compositions are identified by Olatunji (1998, p.5) as stated by Sowande. They include, "those in which European forms are used without any reference to Nigerian elements in the music" and those which "aim at the fusion of European forms with one aspect or another of Nigerian, African or Afro-American music." While writing on the life and works of Akin Euba, Uzoigwe (1978, p.13) also identifies three main categories which Euba himself had suggested in several works of his published articles. These include, music based on Western styles, which makes no conscious use of African styles; music in which African and 'Western' elements are more or less co-dominant; and music based entirely on African traditional models. Uzoigwe further divides the second category into two groups namely, works that appear to possess more Western musical elements and those that possess more African elements.

Omojola (1995, p.89), in an attempt to group Laz Ekwueme's works, classifies them under four categories namely, original choral works; choral arrangements; opera; and chamber and large orchestral work. On the other hand, Ekwueme (2004, p.43) identifies four main categories in which the works of western trained composers of contemporary African music fall. He states:

- (a) African material, including traditional folk tunes, arranged for western instruments. To this class belong Sowande's *African Suite* (for string orchestra), Akpabot's *Suite Nigeriana* (for orchestra), Laz Ekwueme's *Nigerian Rhapsody* (for string orchestra), Sowande's *Yoruba Lament* (for Organ), many piano works and, of course, many settings of folk songs with piano accompaniment, or arrangements for choir of traditional folk songs.
- (b) African musical instruments used in combination with western or other instruments, such as Akin Euba's *Trio for Violin, Horn and Piano* with African drums, Okusanya's *Suite for Piano and Dundun*, and Ayo Bankole's *Ethnophony*, and *Incidental Music to the Tempest*.
- (c) Abstract or semi-abstract compositions as tone poem expressions of African subjects or events: Akpabot's *Nigeria in Conflict* (for Band), Ekwueme's *Flow Gently, Sweet Niger* (for Chamber Orchestra) and *Dance of all the Black Witches* (for string Quintet), Euba's *Impressions on Akwete Cloth* (for Piano), and Fiberesima's opera, *Opu Jaja*.
- (d) A free composition in any idiom that may or may not use African materials. In this category fall works like Phillips's cantata, *Samuel*,

Bankole's *Requiem, Night of Miracles* (an opera), and *Passion Sonata* (for Piano), Euba's *String Quartet*, Ekwueme's *A Night in Bethlehem* (an opera), and *Piano Concertino in Re* (Piano and Chamber Orchestra), Fiberesima's *Fantasia Origin* (for Orchestra), and many more.

The author observes from the above that Laz Ekwueme has by himself categorized his own compositions into three, as those are the groups his works encompass. That is, African material, including traditional folk tunes, arranged for western instruments; Abstract or semi-abstract compositions as tone poem expressions of African subjects or events; and A free composition in any idiom that may or may not use African materials.

Every composer's work is influenced by his background (cultural or educational), his intended audience and the performers of the work. Oyadiran (1998, p.81) identifies three factors namely, educational background, cultural background, and the people. Although Oyadiran's perception of 'the people' as an influence on a composer's work is viewed as teachers, friends and colleagues who have made various contributions to the musical career of the composer, I have chosen to view 'the people' factor beyond Oyadiran's concept. This is because the composer's pre-compositional considerations of the people he is composing for (audience and performers) are key determinants for appraisal of the end result. Musical impact made by the composer's teachers, friends and colleagues are then considered under the composer's backgrounds.

Laz Ekwueme's cultural and religious background, in which his Christian religion plays a dominant role, has to a large extent

influenced his large number of works being sacred. His educational background which is greatly influenced by the Western music training received, has enabled his easy expression of musical compositions in western idiom, thus aiding its global performance. He factors his expected audience into the kind of music he wants to write. The expertise and numerical strength of the performers is also considered crucial. At times, Ekwueme writes a composition in different keys so that different voice parts can comfortably perform it within their vocal ranges. He also arranges some of his works for different choirs. An example is *Elimeli* for voice and piano, *Elimeli* for male voices, and *Elimeli* for SATB. Ekwueme also transcribes into solfa notation some of his previous compositions which he feels may be complex for some choirs or voices within a choir to handle. This helps for ease of practice and rehearsals. The aforementioned factors have contributed largely to the variations in his musical works.

Inspiration in Composition

Apart from a composer's knowledge of the elements of music that would be explored in his compositions, the source of his music becomes the first and unwitting instinct. This occurs in the pre-compositional stage. Since everything in life has an origin, a composer's work thus originates from his inspiration. From interviews had, the author observes that Laz Ekwueme's compositions are sourced melogically, logegenically, and pathogically, as inspired and is not able to tell which is his most sourced when asked. This shows balance in his application of the three sources. He believes that "quite often as we hear many songs or see many things, new ideas come."

Adedeji (2008, p.61) affirms that inspiration is a big word that is indispensable in the process of a composition. He asserts that

inspiration "permeates every aspect of compositional process" and further notes that the source of music is crucial and fundamental to the techniques which would be applied in a composition. He also observes that "the source of any artistic work explains for its type, outlook and greatness" and stipulates that "issues of styles, techniques and sources in art music composition are all distinct but interwoven. Not only are they crucial to composition as an art, they also constitute essential elements responsible for distinctiveness in compositional works." In other words, the aforementioned refer to how the composer's creative expressions are enhanced.

During an interview session, Laz Ekwueme explains to the author, how he gets inspired. He described the word 'inspiration' thus:

An inspiration is a word that could be interpreted in several ways. It means something that motivates you into some creative activity and it can be something you heard, that you enjoy so much that it moves you into trying to do something similar or against or dissimilar from it. It may even be something that you don't like at all and you think you should do something to show how it should be done or to react to it.

Many contributing factors are responsible for every work written by a music composer. Even Palmer (1961, p.5-6) notes that at different points in time, every composer experiences flashes of inspiration which may visit him only a few times in his career, or

quite frequently. He however adds that “it is safe to say that the average composer seldom has the time or the patience to sit down and wait for inspiration before he puts pen to paper. Experience soon teaches him that precious little comes to him who waits.” This is why a composer’s alertness and attentiveness to situations is significant in activating or enhancing his musical dexterity. Lucy Ekwueme described how her husband (Laz) went about his compositions when inspired:

Music is a creative thing.

You don’t need a second feeling whatsoever. It comes internally and he [Laz] writes them out. He could be on the computer from morning (like this morning) till the following morning. Sometimes I beg him to go and eat. Sometimes I just leave him till whenever he feels he’s ready; not ready as such, but when he feels he can take a break because you know, it’s inspirational and you don’t disturb him. So, I just let him let out what he has in his subconscious.

In examining the contextual basis of the composer’s works, information gathered during personal interview on inspiration, served as tool for determining the relationship between his lyrics/texts and music. His texts influenced his melodic lines and vice-versa. (Omotosho 2013, p. 17)



Picture I: End of Interview on the Sources of his Inspiration (20th March, 2012).

Left to Right: Author, Laz Ekwueme and his wife, Lucy Ekwueme at their Lagos Residence -The Chorale House, Yaba. (One of the Rehearsal Venues for his Chorale Group from 2003 to 2011).

The Contextual Sources of Laz Ekwueme’s Compositions and Mode of Inspiration

Contextual sources of composition refer to situations surrounding a composition, that is, ‘why’ a composition was done or ‘what’ led to it. On the other hand, the mode of inspiration refers to ‘how’ a composer or composition was influenced or carried out, or the channel through which the musical creation was achieved. Since inspiration play significant role in composition, it will be discussed at par with the contextual sources of Ekwueme’s compositions as it enhances the nature and quality of his musical works. The contextual sources include:

1. Cultural influences – folklife during his childhood and Christian religion.
2. His personal life experience – Dreams, and a flash.

3. Exposure to musical styles - Listening to other composer's works.
4. Exploration of musical styles contextually sourced – Being inspired by the tune or melody of another's composition, desire for an African idiom of expression of certain foreign works, better perception and appreciation; sometimes in his own language, and drawing ideas and inspiration from the title of an existing work.
5. Emotions - Passion time, while empathizing with the suffering of Christ.
6. Social or Political occurrence – Nigerian civil war (Biafran war) of 1967 – 1970.
7. Relationships with people – Special musical requests for a specific choir formation, and also for a composition.
8. Religion and Biblical stories – The story of Moses, Pharoah and the Israelites.
9. Location – Environment, sceneries or atmospheric condition of a place.

Cultural Influences – Folklife During his Childhood and Christian Religion.

Having grown up in the village, listening to folk tales and singing folk songs, Laz Ekwueme's compositions largely reflect folk qualities. So also, are his sacred songs which reflect his Christian religion. *Obi Dimkpa* is a

folk song he wrote in 1980 which has become very popular in the East. Children are often found singing the song as folk song. It was never a folk song but is being thought as such because of its wide spread in the East. Laz affirms that "it is gratifying to notice that some of my own songs have now become folk songs". His introits showcase some of his sacred songs.

Folk Song Written as Inspired in His Sleep - *Obi Dimkpa* (1980)

During the personal interview held on the 20th of March, 2012, Laz Ekwueme explicates being inspired in diverse ways, sometimes in his sleep. One of such compositions is *Obi Dimkpa* which he composed while in North Korea. See excerpt below. He explains that when he gets up from bed, he works on it, and even at a later time. He emphasizes that "that's where the perspiration comes". For him, the inspiration may come as a flash, but the perspiration is where the sweat and tears come. That is when he actually works on what he has been inspired on. He then applies the knowledge of composition which he has acquired. These are the experiences gathered and garnered from various sources brought into play in turning the original inspiration into a creative work. He believes that a composer must have the art, the technique and the skill of transforming his inspiration into a creative work. Sometimes, Laz Ekwueme does not even remember what he 'received' in his sleep, when he wakes up.

OBI DIMKPA
(BROTHERHOOD OF YOUTH)

IGBO GLEE for Male Voices
with Baritone Solo

Words and music by Laz Ekwueme
Composed in Pyong Yang, N. Korea
May, 1980.

Robust and majestic
Verse 1. *Tutti f*

Ten. I
Ten. II
Bass I
Bass II

We-l'o-bi dim-kpa kpa-gha-li-ba, We-l'o - bi dim-kpa
Stretch hand of broth-er-hood; Stretch out a right hand
Solo (Baritone) out a right
Lov-ing as nest-ling of the same brood! E - ye,
Oh - yes, yes,

Chorus (after each of Verses 1-4). After V.5 go on
Ah, Dynamics, variable ad lib.! to **+**

kpa-gha-li-ba; Kwan-go, kwan-go, i-gba n-ni na o - fe O-nye-a-gba-
of broth-er-hood! Caring, sharing; lov-ing one a-no - ther: Mak-ing ev-
na-ri-li a-wo-lo ya e-ko-lu; A-gba-r'u-z'o-we-le mgba na o-da
ery one else your own-- true brother; Malice towards none, good as ev-ery
e - chi nu: We-l'o - bi dim-kpa kpa-gha-li - ba!
youth should, Stretch out a right hand of broth-er-hood!

Ka dim-kpa
a right hand

Excerpt I: *Obi Dimkpa* - showing Igbo and English texts as well as place of composition.
Source: Laz Ekwueme

Exposure to Musical Styles - Listening to Other Composer's Works.

Anthem:

Ekwueme wrote some anthems which were inspired by other composers' anthems that he had listened to and tried to write in their style. Laz Ekwueme is so passionate about music that on his birthday, the 28th of January, 2012, during a phone conversation, he mentions to the author that "the work of a particular music inspires [hum] sometimes to write something similar to that style or technique." An example is "Waft Him Angels Through The Skies".

Carol:

There are times when Ekwueme hears a carol from abroad and gets moved so much that he feels there should be a Nigerian version of it. He then decides on a theme. At times a melody could inspire him to write a Christmas carol. An example is "The Animal Carol".

Mass:

Missa Africana is a composition brought about by Ekwueme's exposure to a Latin mass called *Missa Luba*. *Missa Africana* means African mass. In the sixties there was a Catholic Priest who is assumed to be from Belgium origin. This Priest worked in Congo Kinshasha and got a group of young people to perform the Latin Mass having five sections which are the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Benedictus (grouped as one though they are actually two), and then the Agnus Dei. This Belgium Monk got the Congolese boys to sing the mass in an African idiom with African drums, bells and gongs, and having antiphonal response typical of African music.

When *Missa Luba* was performed, Laz Ekwueme felt it was good though it was only recorded *ad libitum* (at liberty). He believed that to have a mass in an African idiom, it ought to be notated and not just recorded at liberty because the next time it would be performed could be in a different key and the instrumentation may vary. As a result of lack of notation, each performance was also different. This propelled him to think that there should be, not necessarily a better way but, another way of expressing an African mass which would bring the dignity of the mass as a church service; as a holy sacramental liturgical performance with the holy of the holies and the triune God, the trinity.

Exploration of Musical Styles Contextually Sourced

Waft Him Angels Through the Skies (2006):

Having been inspired by the title - Aria from Jephtha by Handel, Laz Ekwueme composed a new poem with words that told the story of a servant of God who lived a magnificent godly life, yet went through difficulty. This servant of God went through so much difficulty from childhood up to the point of losing his wife, parents, and all he had, yet he remained steadfast in his service to the Lord.

Abu Umu Anu (Domestic Animals Carol) (1996):

The idea of an animal carol was drawn from the birth of Christ. There was nobody else there except Mary, Joseph, the little child and some animals. Ekwueme thought of what the reactions of these animals could be under such circumstance. He thought "they don't speak, they don't communicate but they have their own senses of some sort which we perhaps are not able to discern but

can be converted into a humorous human understanding". Thus, the sound of animals such as goat, sheep, cow, chicken, cat, dog, the Animal carol.

etc., are heard making music in a creative manner in

125₃

DS

Maa! — Maa! — A — mu — ru e — ze'ye

rit. *Fine*

**1 & *2: Intone for the various animals at each stanza.*
 m : m l : l . s m : m m : s . d l : s l : l . s
 E-wu, A-tu-ru, E-hi, O-ku-ku, Nwa-mba, N-ki-ta, etc.
 Goat ... Sheep ... Cow ... Chicken ... Cat ... Dog ...

****3 Various animal sounds as appropriate.*
 Goat, Sheep, Cow, Chicken, Cat, Dog, Etc.

*****4 As an optional last ending, reintroduce here and continue the various animal sounds (previously introduced), and any new ones (ad libitum), simultaneously together (by the solo voices) while the choir sings until the end of the song!*

Excerpt II: *The Animal Carol* - showing list of animals and performance directions.

Source: Laz Ekwueme

Missa Africana (1964):

In *Missa Africana*, the same Latin words used in the original work, were used in Ekwueme's arrangement but they were expressed in a melody that portray African colour and harmonized in a more contemporary way (a relatively universal way so that anybody could pick up the score and sing it anywhere) with African instrumentation in the orchestra. He further increased the vocal parts by subdividing each part into two, that is, S1,S2, A1,A2, T1,T2, and B1,B2. Sometimes a triple division in some parts is also created, thus resulting in a somewhat double chorus composition. *Missa Africana* is the most complex of Laz Ekwueme's compositions. See excerpt III below.

Ekwueme (2001, p.17) notes that "contemporary African composers have written choral works in Latin, English, French, Spanish or even German. With such a composition, the introduction of African features merely gives the work a special effect by which it may be termed African." Omotosho (2013, p. 167) has asserted elsewhere that, due to the large number of choral works in Laz Ekwueme's widely diversified musical compositions, he can be referred to as "The Choral Master of Nigerian Art Music" when compared with all other composers in the history of Nigerian art music.

MISSA AFRICANA

Kyrie

LAZARUS EKWUEME

Adagio

The musical score is written for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass voices. It begins with a 4/4 time signature and a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The tempo is marked 'Adagio'. The lyrics are 'Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son'. The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp*, *mp*, and *mf*, and performance instructions like 'senza cresc.'. The vocal parts are arranged in a way that demonstrates doubling and tripling of voice parts, with some parts having multiple staves. The lyrics are written below the vocal lines, and the musical notation includes notes, rests, and bar lines.

Excerpt III: Missa Africana - showing Doubling and Tripling of Voice Parts in the Kyrie Section.
Source: Laz Ekwueme

Emotions – Passion of Christ

Passion time during lent has also inspired him in his compositions. When empathizing so much with Christ's sufferings, some feelings well up within him so much, such that it leads him to compose a hymn of repentance, purgation and sharing in the suffering of Christ.

Social or Political occurrence – Nigerian civil war (Biafran war) of 1967 – 1970

Let My People Go (1968):

Bearing in mind that negro spirituals are religious songs sung as freedom songs by Africans who were enslaved in America, Ekwueme arranged an existing negro spiritual to suit the context of political unrest experienced by his people – the Igbos, during the Nigerian civil war which was also regarded as the Biafran war (1967 – 1970). He was inspired logogenically by a famous Bible story and phrase within the story – Pharaoh, let my people go. He then also titled

his arrangement, "Let my People Go". The original story is told of how Moses was sent by God to tell Pharaoh, King of Egypt, to release the Israelites from slavery but Pharaoh refused to let them go.

The inhumane treatment and severe famine brought about by the war, caused Laz to see his people - the Igbos as Israelites in the land of Egypt. He adapted the texts "Go on", to sound as the name of the then Head of State - Gowon. Thus, "Go on, go on, let them go. Go on let my people go" was sung as "Gowon, Gowon, let them go. Gowon, let my people go." Asterisks are used in the music score to indicate that "Go on" be sounded like "Gowon" as seen in the excerpt below. A textual analysis on the rhyme pattern of the music has been done elsewhere. (Omotosho, 2025, p.11). The biblical story and political occurrence thus became the contextual source behind the creative expression of his composition.

Spiritual (SATB) LET MY PEOPLE GO!

arr. Laz Ekwueme 3

peo-ple go! — *Go on, go on, let them go, *Go on, let my
 peo-ple go! — If nōt, I'll smite your first born my
 peo-ple go! — *Go on, go on, let them go, *Go on, let my
 *Go on, go on, let them go, O let them go, let my
 peo-ple go! — *Go on, go on let them go, — *Go on, let my peo-ple go! —
 dead! Let my peo - ple go!
 peo-ple go! — *Go on, go on let them go, — *Go on, let my peo-ple go! —
 Go down, Go down, Mos-es, Way down in
 Go down, go down, Mos-es, Go down, Mos-es, Way down in
 Go down, Go down,
 Go down,
ad lib. Tell ——— Ol' Phar - oah, ——— To
Sop. ff
 E - gypt lan'! (shout) Tell ol' Phar-oah! Go, tell ol' Phar-oah!
 *(Some Tenors may join the Soprani)
 (shout)

allargando
fff
 Let my peo - ple go!
allargando
fff

* "Go on" is intended to sound like "Gowon"!

© Laz E.N. Ekwueme, 1967.
 Yale University, New Haven,
 Connecticut, U.S.A.

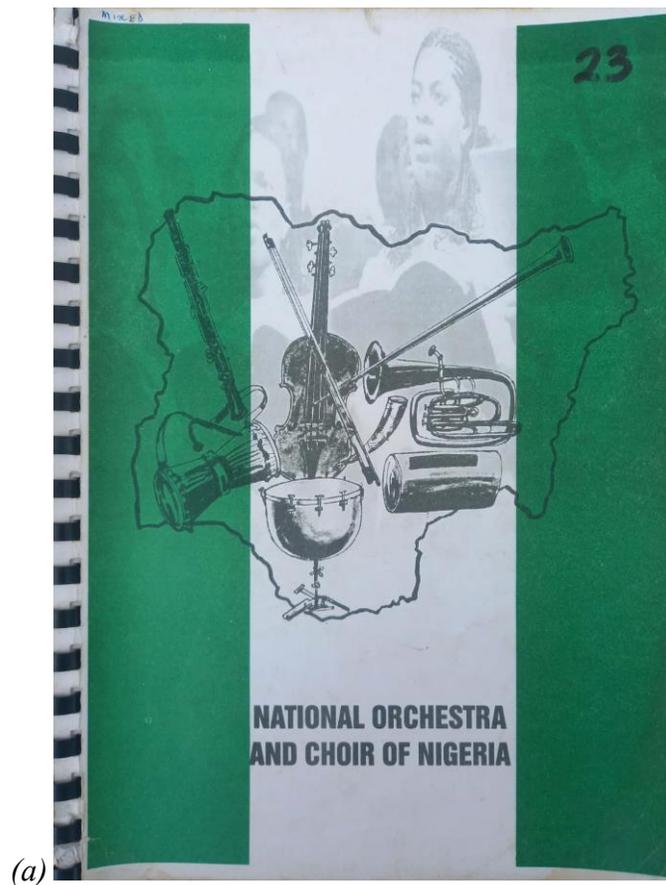
Excerpt IV: Let My People Go – Showing Asterisks Indicating “Go on” to Sound like “Gowon”.
 Source: Laz Ekwueme

Relationships with People – Special Musical Requests

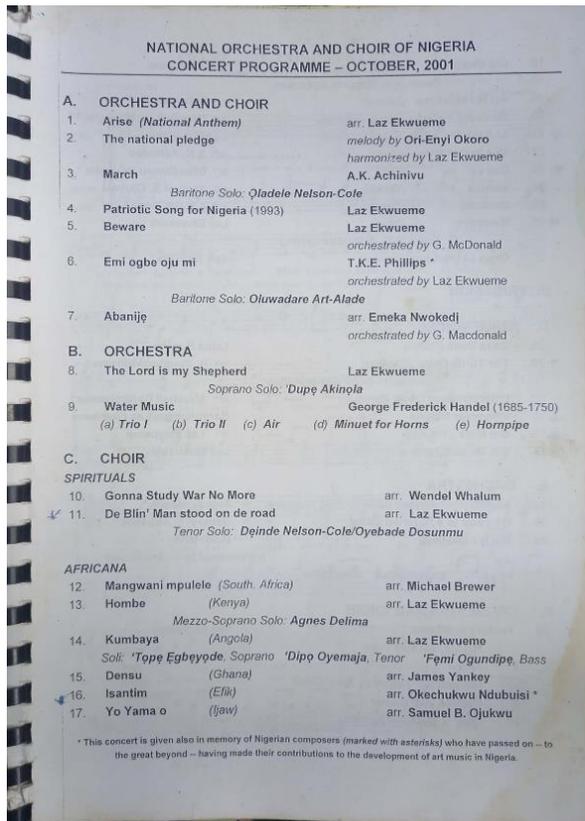
Formation of National Choir:

In 2001, Jerry Ghana, the minister for information and national orientation asked Laz Ekwueme to form a national orchestra and choir of Nigeria but was however unable to get the former head of state, General

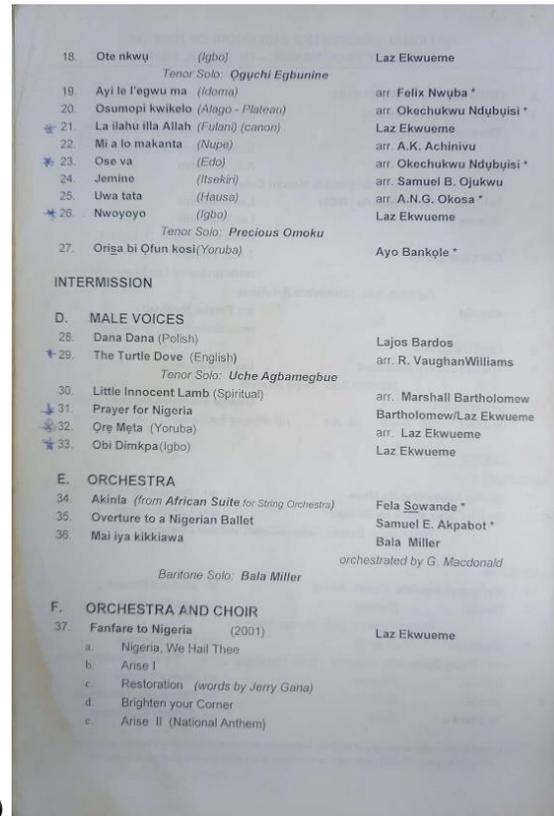
Olusegun Obasanjo to fund it. An attempt was however made by Ekwueme, which eventually birthed the first and last performance by the national orchestra and choir of Nigeria, before the group was dissolved. Ekwueme's compositions and some other notable composers' works were performed. Below are images of the choral book and order of works performed.



Picture II (a): Chorale Book for the National Orchestra and Choir of Nigeria, By Laz Ekwueme. Source: Laz Ekwueme



(b)



(c)

Pictures II (b) & (c): Concert Programme of the National Orchestra and Choir of Nigeria. October, 2001.

Showing Order of Musical Works Performed at the Event. Source: Laz Ekwueme

Funeral Anthem: Waft Him Angels through the Skies (2006)

A special request for an anthem was made to Ekwueme by the daughter of a certain Bishop of Asaba who was a Right Reverend in his (Ekwueme's) town. He then composed a funeral anthem titled, "Waft Him Angels through the Skies", having being pathogenically inspired by the Aria from Jephtha by Handel. He narrates to this author that "Jephtha promised God he would sacrifice whatever he saw first to God only for his daughter to be the one that ran out to greet him". The original title of the Aria is "Waft her angels thro' the skies".

Location

An environment, natural sceneries and atmospheric conditions also serve as contextual sources in enhancing Laz Ekwueme's creative expressions.

Conclusion

Laz Ekwueme's cultural background lies heavily on folk music and his Christian religion. His alertness and attentiveness to diverse situations play significant roles in activating and enhancing his creative expressions of musical dexterity in the nature and distinctive quality of his musical

works. Proper interpretation and deep appreciation of his compositions would be achieved through the understanding of contexts surrounding his musical works. These contextual sources give meaning and significance to his works, and are captured in his childhood folklife, personal life experiences, exposure to musical styles, inspiration in diverse ways, political events, relationships with people, religion, and location. Therefore, in significantly enhancing creativity in music compositions, contextual sources become vital for inspiration.

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