Contemporary Performance Practices in Nigerian Choral Music: A Study of Gbenga Obagbemi's Performances

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Abstract

Choral music has long been a part of African communal life and cultural expression through group singing. In recent times, the growing visibility of choral performances has made it necessary for choir directors to adopt strategies that broaden audience reach and improve appreciation across social groups. This paper examines contemporary performance practices with a focus on Gbenga Obagbemi and the Emerald Choir, Akure. Using the performances of Emi wo and Gbese as case studies, the study explores how choral music gains acceptance in Nigeria across different social classes. An analytical approach is used to examine lyrical content, performance style, and audience reception. Interviews with Obagbemi and selected choir members reveal features of his music that appeal to a wide audience, including the use of traditional Nigerian melodies, familiar themes, and unique choral arrangements. The findings also show that Obagbemi often uses pre-recorded instrumental tracks instead of live accompaniment and that his role as conductor includes additional responsibilities beyond directing. In conclusion, the study shows that Obagbemi's methods have enhanced audience engagement with choral music in Nigeria. His approach offers practical ideas for choir directors seeking to make choral music more relevant and accessible in today's society.

Keywords: Choral Music, Contemporary Styles, Music Concerts, Nigeria, Social Strata

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Introduction

Choral music has long been a vital aspect of Nigeria's rich musical heritage, evolving through various cultural and historical influences. Traditionally, choral music in Nigeria has been deeply intertwined with religious and communal life, serving as a means of preserving and transmitting cultural values and narratives. De Beer and Shitandi (2012) posits that "the presence of choral forms of African traditional music is exemplified by its social and communal aspects. Indeed, in most indigenous African communities, music making was and still can be conceptualized as choral''. This means that African traditional music is inherently communal, with choral forms being a natural expression of this collective culture. In many indigenous African communities, music is a shared experience where everyone participates, reflecting the idea that music-making is fundamentally a group activity, rather than an individual one.

In recent years, however, there has been a noticeable shift in the content and context of choral music performances, driven by music directors who skillfully integrate contemporary styles with traditional elements. This evolution has expanded the reach and appeal of choral music, making it accessible and enjoyable to a broader audience. For instance, Integrating dance and choreography into choral performances enhances audience engagement and appeal of choral music performances. (Yeboah & Arkhurst, 2023)

Gbenga Obagbemi is a very good example of a music director whose performance art has bridged the gap between the elite and the general populace in Nigeria. His performances together with De Emeralds choir, have garnered widespread acclaim for their ability to resonate with diverse audience groups. Obagbemi's performances exemplify a unique fusion of traditional Nigerian melodies and contemporary choral techniques, creating shows that are both culturally rich and universally appealing.

Plate 1: Gbenga Obagbemi conducting during a live performance

Source: Youtube Video Screenshot @ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azDR WJd-Z24

Thus, the focus of this paper is to analyze how Gbenga Obagbemi's choral music performances have achieved acceptance over the years. Specifically, it explores the performance style, audience engagement, and reception of 'Emi wo' and 'Gbese' both of which are his musical arrangements. By adopting a qualitative method that includes interviews with Obagbemi and members of his group, as well as an in-depth analysis of these performances, this study aims to uncover the elements that contribute to the widespread appeal of his performances.

Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory

Dramaturgical theory, created by sociologist Erving Goffman in the mid-20th century, offers a unique viewpoint on social interaction by envisioning it as a type of theatrical performance. Goffman's theory

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AFUJMA, Vol.2 2025

draws parallels between the stage and everyday life, suggesting that individuals engage in impression management and role-playing to present themselves to others in particular ways.

At the basis of dramaturgical theory is the notion of the "dramaturgical metaphor," which asserts that individuals execute roles similar to performers on a stage in diverse social contexts (Volpato, 2021). Goffman likens social circumstances to theatrical stages, where individuals enact written performances to communicate precise perceptions to their audience. These performances are defined by front-stage and back-stage behaviors, where front-stage actions represent the public presentation of self, while back-stage behaviors occur in private settings and entail preparation and rehearsal for the front-stage performance.

The idea of "impression management," which describes the strategies that people use to influence the perceptions other people have of them in social situations, is fundamental to Goffman's theory (Whelan, 2020). This involves carefully regulating one's conduct, appearance, and linguistic clues to project a desired image or identity to others. For example, individuals may engage in impression management by wearing proper dress, using precise language, or adopting particular mannerisms to project a desired persona in social circumstances.

Another crucial concept in dramaturgical theory is "role-playing," which refers to the process of taking and performing social roles in diverse circumstances (Cherian and Shantanu, 2023). Goffman contends that persons inhabit numerous roles concurrently, each with its own set of expectations, norms, and behaviors. These roles may be written or improvised, depending on the social situation and interaction partners. Through role-playing, individuals traverse complex social processes and negotiate their identities within various social institutions. Dramaturgical theory also emphasizes the importance of "audience" in social relations, referring to the individuals or groups who see and interpret the performances of others. Goffman says that individuals modify their performances based on their perceived audience, adjusting their conduct to generate various reactions or responses. This understanding of audience expectations shapes the tactics individuals employ to regulate their impressions and establish their identities in social settings.

Historical Context of Choral Music in Nigeria

Traditional music possesses a profound ability to engage with the entirety of human nature, demonstrating its effectiveness through its functions and deep connection to everyday life. Its role extends far beyond mere entertainment, as it embodies cultural values, reinforces societal norms, and shapes aesthetic appreciation. In Nigeria, music is valued not just for its artistic qualities but for its capacity to reflect, consolidate, and propagate the philosophical concepts and value systems of the people. These elements are embedded in performance styles, including song-texts, rhythmic dynamism, symbolic visual representations, and the use of costumes, makeup, and body adornments, all of which enhance the cultural significance of traditional music. (Ibekwe, 2017)

Choral music in Nigeria has deep roots in the country's rich cultural and musical heritage. Historically, choral singing has been an integral part of various ethnic groups' communal and religious practices.

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AFUJMA, Vol.2 2025

Traditional choral music often features call-and-response patterns, intricate rhythms, and the use of indigenous languages and dialects. These practices are not only artistic expressions but also serve as vehicles for preserving and transmitting cultural values, stories, and histories. For example, among the Yoruba people, traditional choral music is often performed during festivals and ceremonies, accompanied by indigenous instruments such as the bata drums and talking drums, which add a distinctive cultural flavor to the music. Similarly, the Igbo and Hausa ethnic groups have their unique choral traditions, each contributing to the richness of Nigeria's musical landscape (Obijiaku, 2023).

The introduction of Western classical music during the colonial period significantly influenced Nigerian choral music. Missionaries and colonial administrators brought Western musical traditions, including hymns, anthems, and cantatas, which were introduced in churches and schools. For so many years, mission churches were led by foreign missionaries and their worship experiences were European both in orientation and actual performance (Ibude, 2020). Nigerian choirs began adopting Western harmonic structures, notation systems, and choral forms, blending them with their traditional practices. This fusion led to the development of a unique hybrid style of choral music that reflects both Western and African influences.

In the post-independence period, there was a renewed interest in traditional African music, including choral forms, as part of efforts to preserve and promote Nigeria's cultural heritage. Musicians and composers began reviving traditional choral elements, blending them with contemporary compositions as part of a larger cultural renaissance focused on national identity and pride. Incorporating folk songs, proverbs, and traditional narratives into choral works became a widespread practice, enriching the repertoire and keeping traditional elements relevant in modern contexts. Amuah and Wuaku (2019) note that the integration of proverbs in choral music helps to sustain and enhance the learning of our rich oral traditions.

Contemporary Nigerian choral music has continued to evolve, reflecting global musical trends and technological advancements. The rise of gospel music in the late 20th century introduced new performance styles and repertoire into the choral scene. Gospel choirs, characterized by their dynamic and spirited performances, became popular, especially in urban areas. This genre's influence is evident in the incorporation of gospel elements, such as soulful melodies, improvisation, and rhythmic complexity, into mainstream choral music (Okafor, 2019). Furthermore, the advent of digital technology has revolutionized choral music production and dissemination. Choirs now use digital tools for rehearsals, recordings, and performances, reaching wider audiences through social media and online platforms. This technological integration has expanded the scope and impact of Nigerian choral music, making it accessible to a global audience.

Contemporary Trends in Nigerian Choral Music Performances

Nigerian choral music has undergone significant transformation in recent years, reflecting broader socio-cultural, technological, and artistic developments. These contemporary trends highlight the dynamic and adaptive nature of choral music

in Nigeria, as it continues to evolve within a globalized cultural landscape. A prominent trend in Nigerian choral music is the fusion of traditional African musical elements with contemporary styles (Akpakpan, 2010). This hybridization creates a unique and rich sound that appeals to a wide audience. Choral composers and directors incorporate indigenous rhythms, melodies, and languages into their works, blending them with Western classical music techniques. This fusion not only preserves cultural heritage but also makes choral music more accessible and relatable to younger generations. For instance, Watekeria Tamuno as arranged by Chinedu Osinigwe exemplify this particular trend, as it integrates traditional Nigerian folk elements with Western harmonies and structures.

Moreover, technological advancements have had a profound impact on the production, distribution, and consumption of choral music in Nigeria. Digital recording and editing tools have enhanced the quality of choral music productions, allowing for more polished and professional outputs. Social media platforms and streaming services have provided choirs with new avenues to reach global audiences. The rise of virtual choirs and online performances has become particularly significant, especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Nweke, 2021). For example, the Lagos City Chorale and a host of other choirs and chorale groups in Nigeria, utilized virtual platforms to continue their performances during the pandemic, reaching audiences worldwide and maintaining engagement with their followers. These technological tools have democratized music production and distribution, enabling even smaller, lesser-known choirs to gain visibility and recognition.

In addition, contemporary Nigerian choral music is characterized by a diversification of themes and repertoire. While traditional themes related to religion and folklore remain prevalent, there is a growing emphasis on addressing contemporary social issues such as corruption, environmental sustainability, and human rights. This thematic expansion reflects a broader trend within the arts to engage with and comment on current societal challenges. For instance, the Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON) Choir has performed pieces that tackle issues like environmental conservation, using their platform to raise awareness and inspire action. Additionally, choirs are increasingly performing works from a diverse array of composers, including those from different ethnic backgrounds and those who are part of the Nigerian diaspora. This diversification enriches the choral music scene and promotes cultural exchange and understanding.

Innovations in performance practice have become a hallmark of contemporary Nigerian choral music. Choirs are experimenting with new staging techniques, choreography, and multimedia elements to enhance their performances. Okeke (2023) posits that 'Staging techniques have undergone tremendous transformations with the advent of new media into theatre practice and performance. In fact, in recent times, modern theatre practice has become a medley of science/technology and art with the introduction of digital technology into theatrical performances'. These innovations are aimed at creating a more immersive and engaging experience for audiences. For example, many choirs like the City Choir, incorporates dance and visual art into their performances, while others use lighting, LED screens and projection to create

dramatic effects. These performance practices not only captivate audiences but also push the boundaries of what choral music can be. The use of traditional African dance in choral performances adds a visual dimension that complements the music, creating a holistic artistic experience.

Globalization has facilitated increased interaction and collaboration between Nigerian choirs and their counterparts around the world. Nigerian choral groups participate in international festivals, competitions, and workshops, where they share their unique musical traditions and learn from others. These global interactions have led to cross-cultural collaborations and the blending of diverse musical styles. For instance, earlier in the year, the Mountain Top Chorale participated in the World Choir games and came back winning gold medal in their category.

Overview of 'Emi Wo' and 'Gb'ese'

Lyrics	**English Translation**
Emi wo mo wo	I beheld and looked
Emi wo mo wo	I beheld and looked
Emi wo mo wo yika	I looked and seriously accessed the occurrences around me
Mo ri p'ope ye Baami	I concluded that my Father (God) is worthy to be praised
Mo ri p'ope ye Baami mo f'ope fun o	I concluded that God is worthy to be praised, I praise Him
Mo wo 'bi t'oti bere	I looked at where you started from
Mo wo 'bi t'o ba de	I see where you are now
Bi'ye mi o ba si lati ma yin o	If I'm not wise enough to praise you
A je pe mo ya'laimore	Then I'm an ungrateful person

"Emi wo" is a choral arrangement by Gbenga Obagbemi that exemplifies the dynamic intersection of traditional Yoruba music and contemporary choral practices. This piece is a rearrangement of two popular Yoruba songs: "Emi wo," originally performed by Evangelist Bisi Alawiye Aluko in the early 2000s, and "Mo wo bi to ti bere." Obagbemi's adaptation of these songs into a choral version showcases his ability to innovate within the framework of traditional music, making it accessible and engaging for modern audiences. In this arrangement, the choir members alternate roles, with the ladies initiating the call and the men responding, and vice versa. This technique not only enhances the communal aspect of the performance but also reflects the call-and-response traditions that are deeply embedded in African musical practices. The

interaction between the different sections of the choir adds a dynamic and rhythmic complexity to the piece, keeping the audience engaged throughout the performance.

The performance of "Emi wo" is further distinguished by its choreographed movements, which are simple yet effective in enhancing the communication of the song's message. The choreography adds a visual dimension to the performance, helping to convey the emotional and spiritual themes of the piece in a way that is accessible to the audience. These movements are not overly elaborate, allowing the focus to remain on the vocal performance while still providing a visually engaging experience. Another unique aspect of the performance is the use of pre-recorded instrumentation. Unlike traditional choral performances that might feature live instrumental accompaniment, "Emi wo" is accompanied by a pre-recorded track, with only one person miming on the keyboard

during the performance. This choice underscores a modern approach to choral music, where technology is utilized to maintain consistency and precision. While the absence of live instruments might be unconventional, it does not detract from the overall impact of the performance. Instead, it highlights the adaptability of traditional music to contemporary settings.

The conductor plays a pivotal role in the performance of "Emi wo," not only by guiding the choir but also by actively participating in the performance. Rather than standing still, the conductor dances while conducting, adding energy and charisma to the performance. This approach breaks the conventional image of a choral conductor and contributes to the overall vibrancy of the piece. Additionally, the conductor involves the audience by signaling them to join in the singing at certain points, thereby transforming the performance into an interactive and communal experience.

Gb'ese composed by Doyinsola Kayode

Lyrics	English Translation
Emi a s'ise, emi yo o la l'aiye o	I will work, I will make it in life
Emi a ja fafa, ma gb'ese laiye mi	I will be smart in my life
Iwe n'mofe ka, tabi ise n'mofe se	Either I go to school or acquire a skill
K'owuro mi, osan, ale le dun gan	That every season of my life may turn out well
Gb'ese, ko ko ko	Smart up
Maa gb'ese ko ni wo serere	I'll smart up, I won't be sluggish
Ko ko ka, mura s'ise	Ko ko ka, I'll be diligent
Oya ko gb'ese re	Be smart
Gbese re mase fala folo	Smart up, don't be dull

Gbera o, k'ise yen le tan	Smart up and make your mark
Jowo kala o ore mi, ka le yan fanda	Let's be proactive, better days ahead
Gbe soolu re, ko gb'ese te le	Do it step by step

"Gb'ese," as arranged by Gbenga Obagbemi, is a vibrant choral piece that cleverly bridges the gap between contemporary Nigerian youth culture and traditional choral music. The song is based on a composition by Doyinsola Kayode and utilizes the popular Yoruba slang "Gb'ese," which literally means "lift your leg." This phrase gained widespread popularity in Nigeria around 2018 as part of the "Zanku" dance craze, a dance style characterized by energetic footwork, shoulder rolls, and a signature kick, popularized by the Nigerian artist Zlatan, particularly in the song "Able God" by Chinko Ekun.(Abimbolu, Aderemi, Ade-Peter, & Makinde, 2020)

In Obagbemi's choral adaptation, "Gb'ese" takes on a deeper, connotative meaning beyond its dance origins. The song uses "Gb'ese" as a metaphor for taking action and being proactive essentially, a call to "smart up." It emphasizes the importance of seizing opportunities early in life, especially for the youth, and conveys the message that time waits for no one. The lyrical content is motivational, urging listeners to start working towards success without delay.

The performance of "Gb'ese" is particularly notable for its strategic use of the Zanku dance, which was incorporated to capture the attention of younger audiences. By including this popular dance style in the choral performance, Obagbemi not only made the piece visually appealing but also created a connection with the youth, drawing them in to appreciate the choral arrangement. This clever fusion of contemporary dance with choral music demonstrates how traditional forms can be revitalized and made relevant to modern audiences.

General Observations and Findings

Gbenga Obagbemi's approach to choral music is a fusion of traditional African elements with contemporary performance techniques, creating a unique and engaging experience for both the choir and the audience. In his arrangements of "Emi wo" and "Gb'ese," Obagbemi employs a variety of performance styles and techniques that not only enhance the musicality of the pieces but also make them accessible and appealing to modern audiences.

In "Emi wo," Obagbemi utilizes the call-and-response technique, a hallmark of African musical traditions. In African music, call and response technique occur both in instrumental and vocal music. Call and response can occur when; i) the lead singer sings the song from the beginning to the end followed by the backup singers or chorus, ii) the lead singer takes a part of the song while the other singers join midway between the renditions (Oikelome, 2021). This method involves a dynamic exchange between different sections of the choir, where the ladies initiate the call and the men respond, or vice versa. This interactive format

encourages participation and creates a sense of unity among the choir members. The technique also adds rhythmic complexity and keeps the performance lively and engaging. In "Gb'ese," while the call-and-response pattern is less pronounced, the rhythmic interplay between the choir sections still reflects this traditional African approach, subtly embedded within the performance.

Moreover, both "Emi wo" and "Gb'ese" feature choreographed movements that complement the vocal performance. In "Emi wo," the choreography is simple, with movements that align with the rhythm and message of the song. This simplicity allows the audience to focus on the lyrics and the music, while the movements enhance the overall performance without overshadowing it. In "Gb'ese," the choreography is more pronounced, incorporating the popular Zanku dance. This modern dance style, characterized by vigorous footwork and expressive body movements, not only draws the attention of younger audiences but also ties the performance to contemporary Nigerian culture. The inclusion of dance in both pieces demonstrates Obagbemi's understanding of the importance of visual elements in enhancing the musical experience.

Additionally, a distinctive feature of Obagbemi's performances, particularly in "Emi wo," is the use of pre-recorded instrumental tracks instead of live accompaniment. This choice reflects a modern approach to choral performance, where technology is used to ensure consistency and precision. The pre-recorded tracks provide a stable musical foundation, allowing the choir to focus on their vocal performance. While live instrumentation might bring spontaneity and variation, the

use of pre-recorded music in these pieces ensures a polished and controlled sound, which is essential in maintaining the integrity of the choral arrangement. Despite the advantages of pre-recorded instrumentation, there are notable drawbacks. The choir may potentially fall out of sync with the track, which, if not carefully managed, could compromise the entire performance. Additionally, technical issues, such as a power outage during the performance, present a significant risk. Most importantly, pre-recorded instrumentation limits artistic expression, restricting the flexibility and spontaneity that live performances often offer.

Also, Obagbemi's role as a conductor goes beyond traditional conducting. In "Emi wo," he actively participates in the performance by dancing and engaging with the choir and the audience. His minimal conducting gestures are complemented by his movements, which add energy to the performance. By dancing along with the choir, Obagbemi breaks the conventional image of a choral conductor, making the performance more relatable and enjoyable for the audience. In "Gb'ese," his incorporation of the Zanku dance serves a similar purpose, connecting with the audience through a popular cultural trend. Additionally, Obagbemi often signals to the audience to join in the singing, transforming the performance into an interactive experience. This level of audience engagement is a crucial technique in his performances, fostering a sense of community and shared experience.

Another important finding in both "Emi wo" and "Gb'ese" is the use of simple, catchy melodies. In "Emi wo," the melody is straightforward, making it easy for both the choir and the audience to follow along. This

simplicity does not diminish the quality of the music; rather, it enhances its accessibility, allowing a broader audience to connect with the performance. In "Gb'ese," the melody is similarly simple, which, combined with the rhythmic energy of the Zanku dance, creates a performance that is both musically engaging and culturally relevant. The simplicity of the melodies in both pieces ensures that the songs are memorable and easy to sing along with, contributing to their popularity.

Conclusion

Gbenga Obagbemi's "Emi wo" and "Gb'ese" are exemplary in demonstrating how choral music can be both traditional and modern, appealing to a wide audience through the use of effective performance styles and techniques. From the call-and-response structure to the use of pre-recorded instrumentation, choreographed movements, and audience engagement, Obagbemi's approach revitalizes choral music, making it relevant and exciting in contemporary Nigeria. His ability to blend cultural elements with modern performance practices ensures that his music resonates with both traditionalists and younger, more modern audiences.

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