

## **FUSING TRADITIONS: EXPLORING SELECTED WESTERN VOCAL MUSIC THROUGH AFRICAN INSTRUMENTS IN A NIGERIAN RECITAL EXPERIENCE**

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### **Abstract**

Music in Africa is rooted in rhythm, participation, and cultural symbolism, making traditional Western vocal art music, characterised by linear harmony and formal presentation, less engaging for many Nigerian audiences. This study explores the fusion of Western solo vocal music with African traditional instrumental accompaniment, particularly Yoruba percussion, to enhance cultural relevance and listener engagement. The central argument is that integrating African rhythms into Western art songs can bridge aesthetic gaps and foster deeper audience connection. Western classical vocal music is often passively received in Nigeria due to its simplicity and cultural distance, whereas African music is celebrated for its rhythmic complexity and communal energy. This research involves three components: (1) integrating Yoruba traditional instruments into selected Western art songs, (2) live performances of both original and adapted versions, and (3) analysing audience responses. The study is grounded in Kinga Jentetics's theory of strategic integration, which suggests that incorporating culturally familiar elements enhances emotional engagement and loyalty, in this context, to classical vocal music. Using an experimental design, ten Western songs were arranged with and without Yoruba percussion and performed to a live audience. Findings show that the integrated versions elicited greater emotional and physical audience response. Performers also reported heightened expressiveness and stronger audience interaction when accompanied by African rhythms. The study concludes that blending African instruments with Western vocal music offers a promising approach to rebranding classical traditions for Nigerian audiences. It recommends curriculum reforms, further cross-cultural studies, and more performance-based experimentation to promote inclusivity and cultural resonance in global vocal music.

### **Keywords:**

African rhythms, Western vocal music, Yoruba percussion, cultural integration, audience engagement, music education reform

## **Introduction**

Music, as a vital expression of culture, reflects a people's values, traditions, and aesthetics. In African societies, particularly Nigeria, music is deeply participatory and rhythmically vibrant. However, Western classical vocal music, especially solo art songs accompanied by piano, tends to lack the rhythmic intensity and communal engagement characterising African musical traditions. This mismatch has often led to a lack of appreciation for Western art songs among Nigerian audiences. The aesthetic preferences of the African audience centre on rhythm, movement, and participation. For music to resonate within Nigerian cultural contexts, it must embody these qualities. Traditional Western solo art music, rooted in harmonic and melodic complexity, often appears solemn or static to African listeners, resulting in low engagement during performances. As a result, such music is frequently perceived as academic, elitist, and emotionally detached.

This study proposes a dynamic solution: fusing Western art songs with African traditional instrumental ensembles, particularly those from the Yoruba tradition. Instruments such as the *dùndún* (talking drum), *gáangan*, *agogo*, and *sekere* are central

to Yoruba musical expression and capable of infusing Western compositions with polyrhythmic energy. Through integrating these elements, this study aims to "rebrand" Western vocal music for African audiences, preserving its artistic integrity while enhancing its cultural relatability.

Furthermore, this fusion does more than appeal to audience preferences; it revitalises a form of music performance that is struggling to remain relevant in Nigerian society. As popular music continues to dominate the soundscape with its rhythmic vitality and participatory spirit, the academic realm of Western vocal music must evolve to survive and flourish. This integration is a performance technique, pedagogical innovation, and cultural bridge.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored in the theory of strategic integration, as developed by Kinga Jentetics (2012), who examines how music branding evolves to maintain public relevance. According to Jentetics, integration involves blending elements to enhance effectiveness, emotional engagement, and audience connection. Music branding, as Jentetics describes, is a strategy that uses musical elements to build

long-term loyalty and emotional resonance between content and audience.

Jentetics emphasises that successful music branding must evoke emotion and cultural familiarity in an era of shifting consumer behaviour. The fusion of traditional African instrumentation with Western vocal music follows this approach by offering a product that speaks musically and culturally to its audience. This “branding” through rhythmic integration aligns with audience expectations and habits, fostering a more genuine and immersive experience.

In the context of Nigerian performance, integrating African rhythms into Western vocal music represents an innovative strategy to enhance audience engagement. Rather than abandoning the foundational structures of Western art music, the fusion allows for an evolution where cultural authenticity meets classical sophistication. Through this lens, the performance becomes an artistic endeavour and a culturally strategic act of musical diplomacy.

### **Drumming in the African Community**

African music has unique spiritual and communicative significance, especially its percussive traditions. Unlike Western drumming, which is often used solely for

entertainment, African drumming is deeply embedded in the cultural and ceremonial life of the people. Wayne (2009) emphasises that African drums are more than musical instruments; they are central to social functions such as births, deaths, and battles, inspiring emotion and unity. The multifunctionality of drums reflects their vital place in African societies, both musically and symbolically.

Ayanbayo Ayandeji elaborates further on this phenomenon while discussing his view on the audience's perspectives about drumming, stating that drumming possesses a supernatural quality that resonates with listeners physically and spiritually. The sound of drums has been described as akin to a heartbeat, immediate and visceral, triggering instinctive physical responses such as dancing or body movement, as listeners feel spiritually connected to the rhythm (Oral Interview, 2024). This quality underscores the participatory nature of African music and the central role rhythm plays in musical engagement. Nketia (1968) also highlights the universality of drumming in African life, noting that even children show an innate attraction to rhythm by drumming on household items. He suggests this familiarity with rhythm is why African audiences are instinctively drawn to

percussive music, making it a critical component of any attempt to adapt foreign music forms to local preferences.

### **Rhythmic Organisation in Yoruba Instrumental Ensembles**

Nketia (1975) presents an in-depth view of rhythmic structures within Yoruba music, noting the use of linear and multilinear patterns. These rhythms are often abstract but meticulously organised within a fixed metric framework. The complex rhythmic layering found in Yoruba percussion ensembles supports the polyrhythmic style characteristic of much African music, making it suitable for integration into structured Western compositions.

This complex rhythmic framework is especially prominent in Yoruba drum ensembles like the *dundun* and *gangan*. Lagbaja (2005) describes the ensemble as having a clearly defined "leader-follower" structure, where the *iyá-ilù* (mother drum) dictates the pace and tone, while smaller drums like *omelè* play supporting, interlocking rhythms. The synergy among these instruments creates a rhythmic tapestry that enriches Western art songs' often-linear structure.

The impact of rhythm on African audiences cannot be overstated. Pfall (2004) asserts that the interweaving of contrasting rhythms in African music reflects and reinforces communal relationships. This supports the idea that rhythm entertains and serves as a social and emotional connector. African music often employs syncopation, placing melodic emphasis off the beat, which adds drive and excitement (Schmidt-Jones, 2008). Combined with call-and-response patterns, this syncopation creates a musical environment where performers and audiences are co-participants. Verna (2015) notes that this participatory aesthetic and dense rhythmic layering (polyrhythm) are central to African musical traditions and can be harnessed to re-energise Western vocal music for African audiences.

The rhythmic structure of African music also inspires expressive performance behaviours. Movements such as clapping, dancing, and body percussion are common responses to rhythmic stimuli, making performances lively and emotionally compelling (Schmidt-Jones, 2008). This reinforces the value of rhythm as a tool for bridging Western and African musical experiences.

### **Performance Practices and African Musical Aesthetics**

African musical traditions emphasise rhythm, and music performance is embodied in an expressive nature. Unlike Western art music, which is often characterised by formal presentation and passive audience reception, African music encourages movement, participation, and emotional dramatisation during performance (Verna, 2015). This difference in aesthetic values explains why many Nigerian audiences perceive Western solo performers as overly formal or emotionally distant.

According to Verna (2015), African performance traditions are marked by a fusion of music, dance, and dramatic expression. Performers often engage their whole bodies through gestures, facial expressions, and dance to convey the emotional core of a piece. These characteristics align closely with the expressive expectations of Nigerian audiences, who respond more positively to visually and emotionally engaging performances. The "call and response" technique is another hallmark of African performance that distinguishes it from typical Western solo singing. Schmidt-Jones (2008) explains that this style breaks down the barrier between performer and audience, allowing for a collaborative performance experience. This participatory element is

crucial in connecting with African audiences and can be used effectively in adapted Western art songs to bridge stylistic and cultural gaps.

Moreover, polyrhythm, the simultaneous combination of contrasting rhythmic patterns, is foundational to African music aesthetics. This complexity enriches the musical texture and allows performers to improvise and interact creatively with rhythm (Pfall, 2004; Verna, 2015). In contrast, Western vocal music tends to rely heavily on harmony and melodic development, with less emphasis on rhythmic complexity. Integrating African rhythms into Western pieces offers a rhythmic enhancement and a cultural re-contextualization that makes the performance more relatable and emotionally resonant.

Verna (2015) also highlights the transformative potential of percussion improvisation. When vocalists perform with African instruments, especially drums like the *gangan* and *dùndún*, the rhythmic support can encourage the singer to move, emote, and interact with the audience more naturally. This improvisational freedom enhances the artistic expression and the audience's immersion in the performance.

This aesthetics collectively inform the cultural logic of musical appreciation in Nigeria. The more prosperous and rhythmically vibrant a piece is, the more likely it is to evoke audience participation through clapping, swaying, dancing, or vocal interjections. Therefore, adapting Western art songs to include these features is not simply a stylistic experiment but a strategic alignment with African cultural values.

The literature reviewed demonstrates a consistent theme: African audiences are rhythm-centred, emotionally expressive, and participatory in their musical experiences. Western art music often fails to meet these expectations in its traditional form. However, by integrating African traditional instrumentation, polyrhythm, call-and-response elements, and expressive performance techniques, it is possible to rebrand and re-contextualise Western vocal music in a way that resonates deeply with Nigerian audiences. This approach enhances appreciation of classical vocal art music in Africa and contributes to the global conversation on musical hybridity and cultural adaptation. Scholars and performers alike are encouraged to engage with these insights to expand vocal performance

practices' reach, relevance, and richness across diverse cultural landscapes.

### **Presentation of Data**

The experimental phase of this study entailed the performance of ten Western art songs in two distinct formats. The first was the traditional format, featuring voice with only piano accompaniment. The second integrated format combined voice, piano, and Yoruba traditional instrumental ensembles. Each song was rhythmically and instrumentally re-composed to incorporate indigenous Yoruba musical elements. Prominent traditional instruments used in this integration included the *agogo*, *sekere*, *gangan*, *dùndún*, *agbamole*, and *omelè*. These instruments were carefully selected and applied to enhance the stylistic fusion between Western art music and Yoruba traditional performance techniques.

"I Will Sing New Songs" (Antonín Dvořák): Integrated with *sekere*, *gangan*, *dùndún*, and *omelè*. The voice entered bar 7 after instrumental build-up, accompanied by layered Yoruba rhythms.

I WILL SING NEW SONGS 7

from Biblical Songs Antonín Dvořák

*Risoluto maestoso*

*p in tempo*  
I will sing new songs of glad-ness, I will sing Je -

*rit.* *in tempo* *p* *smilo*

*poco rit.*  
ho - vah's prais - es up - on a ten - stringed psal - tor - y.

*poco rit.* *cresc.* *fz* *f*

Fig. 1. (Excerpt of "I Will Sing New Songs" by Antonín Dvořák)

"Beautiful Noise" (Neil Diamond): Adapted with *agogo*, *sekere*, *agbamole*, and *gangan*. Yoruba instruments started the piece before the piano and voice joined, enhancing the celebratory mood.

## BEAUTIFUL NOISE

Words and Music by  
NEIL DIAMOND

Moderately  
no chord  
mf

What a beau-ti-ful  
noise com-in' up from the street.  
Got a beau-ti-ful sound;

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Fig. 2. (Excerpt of "Beautiful Noise" by Neil Diamond)

"Air O Liberty" (Handel): The addition of Yoruba drums transformed the solemn tone into a chant-like communal piece. *Dùndún* improvisation initiated the rhythm with piano and voice following at bar 4.

No. 15 Air O LIBERTY, THOU CHOICEST TREASURE  
Israelitish Woman

Largo

[f] Cont. tr

[Solo Vc.]

ISRAELITISH WOMAN

O Li - ber - ty, thou choic - est trea - sure, seat of

vir - tue, source of plea - sure; life with - out thee knows no bless - ing, no en -

- dear - ment worth ca - res - ing, no en - dear - ment worth ca - res -

- ing, no en - dear - ment worth ca - res - ing.

[f]

\* See Preface, p. xiii.

Fig. 3. (Excerpt of "Air O Liberty" by Handel)

Each performance in the concert was structured in two distinct parts. The first was the initial performance, presented strictly as originally composed for voice and piano. The second was a reimagined rendition, enriched with Yoruba rhythmic structures and traditional instruments. The concert,

attended by approximately 200 people, offered valuable qualitative data through audience observation. During the traditional performances, the audience exhibited limited engagement. However, the integrated performances featuring Yoruba elements elicited strong physical responses, including

clapping, head-nodding, and dancing, indicating a deeper connection and enthusiasm.



Fig. 4. Field work, 2024. (Showing the spontaneous response of the audience).

The audible appreciation expressed through cheering and spontaneous applause, particularly during pieces featuring rich drum improvisation, indicates a notable difference in audience reception and emotional engagement between the two performance formats.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The comparative performances reveal the transformative power of rhythm and cultural instrumentation in shaping audience engagement. The data support the hypothesis

that Western art songs, when performed with traditional African accompaniment, become more accessible and emotionally resonant to Nigerian audiences.

Audience members mainly remained passive during the piano-only performances. However, once Yoruba drums and idiophones were introduced, their engagement shifted noticeably, mirroring what Verna (2015) describes as rhythm's capacity to bridge performer and listener through emotional and physical activation.

These findings echo Jentetics's (2012) theory of strategic musical integration, which suggests that rebranding music with culturally familiar elements fosters loyalty and deeper emotional engagement. Thus, the study validates rhythm as an aesthetic enhancement and a strategic tool for cultural adaptation in performance.

Significantly, performers themselves were impacted. The added instruments and rhythms gave singers a new energy and encouraged expressive movement. This supports Schmidt-Jones's (2008) observation that rhythm-oriented music naturally inspires body movement and expressive performance, central to African aesthetics.

Moreover, this study confirms that traditional music's participatory nature is deeply ingrained in Nigerian audiences (Nketia, 1975). Integrating African instruments meets a cultural need for communal experience, which Western music alone often cannot provide. The successful fusion in this study opens doors for curriculum reform in Nigerian music education. Rather than viewing African instruments as separate from "classical" music training, this project demonstrates their pedagogical and artistic relevance. It calls for a more inclusive approach to vocal instruction, where local instruments are used to interpret global repertoire in culturally meaningful ways.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored how integrating African traditional instruments, particularly from the Yoruba culture, can enhance the performance and reception of Western vocal art music among Nigerian audiences. Through experimental performance, audience observation, and theoretical grounding, the research established that rhythm is central to African musical appreciation, and instrumental fusion is an effective method to adapt Western vocal music culturally. The findings affirm that

traditional Western vocal music, when performed in its classical form (voice and piano alone), often fails to engage Nigerian audiences accustomed to participatory, rhythm-rich performance traditions. However, including African percussion *gangan*, *dundún*, *agogo*, and others transforms the sound and the audience's experience. It rebrands the music in a culturally familiar, emotionally engaging, and socially inclusive form.

The fusion offers artistic, educational, and cultural value from the performer and audience perspectives. It empowers vocal performers to express themselves more freely, introduces hybrid performance practices into the academic space, and presents Western art music in a form that is both respectful to its origin and relevant to its new context. Thus, this study contributes to the growing discourse on musical hybridity, advocating for culturally conscious approaches to music performance and education in African contexts.

### **Recommendations**

In light of the findings, several recommendations are proposed to guide music scholars, educators, performers, and institutions toward greater cultural relevance

and innovation in vocal music practice in Nigeria.

- Music departments and conservatories across Nigeria should revise their vocal performance curricula to incorporate the study and application of indigenous instruments alongside Western vocal literature. This integration will enhance cultural relevance, encourage innovation, and deepen student engagement with local and global musical traditions.
- Scholars are encouraged to expand this line of inquiry by exploring the integration of traditional instruments from other Nigerian ethnic groups, such as the Igbo, Hausa, and Tiv. Doing so will diversify the performance landscape and contribute to a more inclusive representation of Nigeria's musical heritage.
- Vocal instructors and students should be encouraged to experiment with African rhythmic accompaniments in recitals, competitions, and public concerts. This practice fosters expressive confidence and strengthens the performer-audience connection through culturally familiar rhythmic elements.
- There is a pressing need to document and publish fusion arrangements that combine Western art songs with African instrumental accompaniment. Such documentation would contribute to a growing repository of Africanized classical music, enabling further study, performance, and widespread adoption.
- Educational institutions and cultural centres should organise concerts and workshops featuring integrated performances. These initiatives can raise awareness, engage local audiences, and introduce younger generations to new possibilities within classical vocal music.
- Finally, fostering collaborations between vocalists and traditional instrumentalists will encourage mutual respect, inspire creative exchange, and potentially lead to developing new musical genres and innovative pedagogical models.

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