HARNESSING TRADITIONAL AFRICAN MUSIC PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUES FOR ART CHORAL PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

This study investigates how traditional African music performance techniques, particularly those rooted in Yoruba Apala and Juju traditions, can be effectively harnessed to enrich leadership in African art choral performance. It posits that African choral conducting, often modelled on Western paradigms, lacks cultural resonance when disconnected from indigenous expressive practices. The problem addressed is the artistic and cultural dislocation that arises when African art music is interpreted solely through Western conducting methods, frequently marginalising the oral, rhythmic, gestural, and participatory dimensions central to African musical logic. The research is guided by Ossaiga's Theory of Conducting Dynamism, which emphasises musical leadership's adaptive and culturally responsive nature, and Linda Hutcheon's Theory of Adaptation, which provides a framework for recontextualising traditional practices into contemporary performance settings. Using a qualitative methodology involving case studies, field observations, performance analysis, and interviews. The study explores how selected African choral conductors have adapted indigenous conducting tools such as gestural communication, polyrhythms, tonal inflexion, and communal engagement into formal art choral contexts. Findings reveal that hybrid conducting techniques rooted in Yoruba musical traditions enhance expressive clarity, deepen cultural authenticity, and foster greater ensemble responsiveness. These adaptations also offer pedagogical and identity-affirming benefits, particularly within African music education systems with long-privileged Western norms. The study concludes that integrating traditional African music performance techniques of choral conducting is feasible and necessary for cultivating a culturally grounded and artistically compelling choral practice in Africa. It recommends a revision of African music curricula to include indigenous conducting methods, investment in research documenting traditional gestures and cues, and greater institutional support for performance experimentation that bridges tradition and innovation.

Keywords: African choral conducting, Yoruba music, Apala, Juju, conducting dynamism, traditional music techniques, hybrid conducting, African art music,

Introduction

Music is a vital medium through which African societies express identity, spirituality, communal values, and historical memory. In the Yoruba cultural setting of Nigeria, traditional music functions not merely as entertainment but as a powerful mode of communication, moral instruction, and social commentary. Yoruba music genres such as *Apala* and *Juju* embody rich layers of rhythm, melody, gesture, and performance techniques that reflect the depth of indigenous African aesthetics. These genres are deeply entrenched in both sacred and secular life, offering modes of performance that involve not just sound, but movement, space, language, and emotion. They provide a dynamic framework of musical leadership in which ensemble direction, expressive conduct, and audience interaction are achieved through gestures, vocal inflexions, improvisations, and communal participation.

Meanwhile, African art music, an intercultural genre born from synthesising Western classical music and African traditional idioms, has emerged as an essential platform for cultural expression, pedagogy, and artistic excellence. Art music compositions by African composers often integrate indigenous languages, rhythmic patterns, and performance themes while adopting structural and theoretical models from Western classical music. However, despite the cultural richness embedded in the compositional content of African art music, the methods used to interpret and present these works, particularly in choral settings, are primarily based on Western conducting traditions. Choral conductors in Africa are typically trained to follow European models of score interpretation, baton technique, and ensemble management, often at the expense of indigenous communicative tools that could resonate more deeply with African performers and audiences.

This reliance on Western conducting methods presents both artistic and cultural limitations. While these techniques may offer technical precision, they frequently do not accommodate the performance logic of African musical traditions, where oral transmission, improvisation, polyrhythms, call-and-response, tonal language, and gestural expression play crucial roles. As a result, many African choral performances, though well-rehearsed and technically proficient, may appear emotionally distant or culturally dislocated, particularly when presented to local audiences accustomed to more embodied and interactive forms of music-making.

In response to these limitations, this study advocates for a culturally grounded model of choral performance leadership that draws inspiration from traditional African performance techniques, particularly those found in Apala and Juju music. These genres provide a wealth of non-verbal communication cues, vocal inflexions, interpretive gestures, and rhythmic strategies that can be recontextualised and adapted for art choral conducting. The study explores how these traditional practices can inform new models of choral leadership that are both musically compelling and culturally resonant.

This paper is situated within a broader discourse of decolonising music pedagogy and performance in Africa. It contends that African choral conductors must move beyond inherited colonial templates to embrace a more holistic, creative, and context-sensitive approach to conducting. This includes incorporating African traditional music's expressive tools, leadership paradigms, and cultural logic into the choral rehearsal and performance environment. By doing so, conductors can bridge the gap between composer intent, performer expression, and audience experience, making choral music a more vibrant and relevant art form in contemporary African society.

The research draws upon both theoretical and practical insights. It employs Linda Hutcheon's *Theory of Adaptation* to frame the process of transferring traditional techniques into new performative contexts, and Ossaiga's *Theory of Conducting Dynamism* to articulate the flexible and evolving nature of musical leadership in African settings. Case studies, fieldwork observations, and performance analyses demonstrate how selected Yoruba conductors have successfully harnessed indigenous performance practices to elevate choral performances' expressiveness and cultural integrity.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that challenges the notion that African art music must be performed within Western paradigms to be considered "authentic" or "standard." Instead, it proposes that African choral music leadership can and should be enriched by the traditions from which it draws its cultural soul. Through this integration of tradition and innovation, conductors can cultivate musically compelling, culturally empowering, and artistically transformative performances.

Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored in two theoretical perspectives: Ossaiga's Theory of Conducting Dynamism and Linda Hutcheon's Theory of Adaptation. These frameworks offer a robust intellectual foundation for exploring how indigenous African music techniques, particularly from Yoruba Apala and Juju traditions, can inform and transform the leadership of art choral music performance in contemporary African contexts.

The theory of Conducting Dynamism, as proposed by Ossaiga (2020), views conducting as a flexible, adaptive, and culturally responsive activity that evolves according to the specific performance environment, musical culture, and the interpretive choices of the conductor. This theory challenges the static, Eurocentric models of conducting, advocating for a more expressive and contextually grounded approach that reflects the musical and cultural realities of the ensemble being led. Ossaiga also notes that

> conducting in African contexts should draw from local traditions of musical leadership, such as those evident in Yoruba performance practices, where gesture, movement, body language, and communal communication are integral to

> musical direction. Conducting is not simply a matter of beat patterns and baton technique, but a dynamic form of embodied leadership that includes emotional intelligence, cultural knowledge, and responsive engagement with performers and audiences (Ossaiga, 2020).

In Yoruba traditional music settings, whether in Apala Street performances or Juju concert environments, the lead performer (drummer, singer, or instrumentalist) uses a range of kinetic, visual, and auditory cues to direct the ensemble. These practices demonstrate that conducting in African settings is deeply relational and performative, often involving full-body motion, verbal interjections, and adaptive gestures based on real-time audience feedback. Ossaiga's framework, therefore, validates the inclusion of these indigenous practices as legitimate and powerful forms of choral leadership.

Linda Hutcheon's Theory of Adaptation offers an equally critical perspective for this study by framing the process of integrating traditional African music techniques into choral conducting as an act of creative transformation. According to Hutcheon (2006), adaptation is both a product and a process, reinterpreting existing cultural forms in new contexts and for new audiences. This concept is especially relevant in performance arts, where music, theatre, and movement are constantly reimagined through new lenses.

Hutcheon identifies seven modes of adaptation: addition, deletion, expansion, integration, variation, transposition, and re-contextualization, which help analyse how elements from Apala and Juju traditions can be adapted for the choral stage (Hutcheon, 2006). For example, rhythmic and melodic motifs from Apala may be integrated into choral arrangements. At the same time, gestural vocabularies from Juju performances could be adapted into conducting cues that emphasise musical expression and audience connection.

Crucially, Hutcheon (2006) argues that adaptation must retain the spirit rather than the form of the original. It should seek cultural authenticity, not mechanical replication. This means that Yoruba traditional performance practices need not be imported wholesale into choral contexts, but rather reinterpreted creatively to resonate with the choral idiom while maintaining cultural integrity. This theoretical approach allows conductors to adapt indigenous facial expressions, bodily movement, and call-and-response phrasing to align with African art music's structural and expressive demands. Moreover, Hutcheon emphasises that adaptation is inherently intertextual and dialogic; it draws upon the meanings and histories of older forms while generating new meanings in the adapted context. In this way, the choral conductor becomes both a curator of tradition and a creator of new performance meanings, bridging past and present in meaningful ways.

Ossaiga's theory and Hutcheon's adaptation framework provide a comprehensive conceptual lens for understanding how African choral conductors can draw from indigenous traditions to enhance musical leadership. Ossaiga emphasises the

embodied, expressive, and culturally rooted nature of conducting, while Hutcheon provides a methodological framework for transferring and transforming traditional practices into new artistic contexts.

This synthesis supports the article's central thesis: Yoruba music's expressive and communicative strengths, particularly Apala and Juju, can be meaningfully and innovatively adapted into the domain of art choral conducting. Through such adaptations, conductors are expanding their expressive repertoire and engaging in acts of cultural reclamation, thereby making African art music performance more culturally resonant and artistically compelling.

Traditional African Music Techniques

Traditional African music is a rich and diverse cultural phenomenon that integrates sound, movement, language, and symbolism into a holistic performance experience. Unlike the Western musical tradition, which tends to isolate performance components such as conductor, score, and audience, African music traditions emphasise unity, interactivity, and fluidity of roles. In the Yoruba musical context, genres such as *Apala* and *Juju* offer compelling models of musical leadership, coordination, and expressivity that challenge and enrich conventional understandings of musical performance and conducting.

Yoruba music, in particular, demonstrates a profound integration of musical and extra-musical elements, including body movement, gestures, proverbs, language tones, and facial expressions. These techniques are ornamental and foundational to transmitting meaning and emotion in traditional music. According to Omibiyi-Obidike (1979), Yoruba music performance is inherently participatory and communicative, relying on visual, verbal, and rhythmic cues that create a shared performance experience between the musician and the audience.

One of the most recognisable features of traditional Yoruba music is call-and-response. This technique involves a lead performer presenting a musical or verbal phrase (the "call") which is then echoed, completed, or contrasted by a chorus or instrumental response. This structure is deeply rooted in African oral traditions and reflects communal engagement, reinforcing shared values and collective identity (Agawu, 2003).

In *Apala* and *Juju*, call-and-response is used to sustain rhythmic flow and punctuate messages, invoke participation, and direct ensemble transitions. This technique offers practical utility for art choral conducting. For instance, sectional entrances or antiphonal textures in SATB arrangements can mirror the call-and-response format, providing conductors with culturally grounded models of musical interaction.

Gesture and body movement are central to musical leadership in Yoruba traditional performance. In *Apala* ensembles, the lead drummer or vocalist communicates interpretive nuances through upper body motion, facial expressions, and hand gestures that function similarly to conducting cues in Western choral practice. As Olaniyan (2013) asserts, Yoruba

drummers assume leadership roles that extend beyond rhythm-keeping; they command ensemble coordination, audience interaction, and dynamic control through non-verbal performance elements.

In this context, movement is not merely expressive but directive. The conductor's swaying, posture shifts, or sudden body stillness can be interpreted as signals for tempo, dynamics, or emotional tone changes. Such practices align with Rhonda Fuelberth's (2003) assertion that conducting in any context relies almost entirely on non-verbal communication, including posture, gestures, and eye contact. Incorporating traditional gestural techniques into choral conducting offers the opportunity to create a more embodied and visually compelling leadership style that resonates with both performers and audiences.

African music is renowned for its complex and layered rhythmic structures, particularly the use of polyrhythms, the simultaneous occurrence of contrasting rhythmic patterns. In *Juju* music, multiple percussion lines interlock to create a fluid rhythmic field that guides movement and improvisation. These rhythmic complexities demand advanced coordination and attentiveness from performers and leaders (Chernoff, 1979).

In choral contexts, polyrhythmic thinking can be adapted into layered rhythmic entries, syncopated voice-leading, or the interweaving of vocal ostinati. Conductors trained in Western beat patterns may find this approach challenging, yet it provides an opportunity for rhythmic innovation and a more authentic African performance style. Moreover, rhythmic emphasis in Yoruba music is often tied to linguistic tone and meaning. As tonal languages dominate many African societies, the rhythmic placement of syllables carries semantic weight. Therefore, polyrhythms are not only musical but also semantic tools in performance.

Another crucial element in Yoruba performance is the alignment of melody with linguistic tone. Like many African tongues, the Yoruba language is tonal, meaning pitch variation changes word meaning. Traditional singers, such as Ayinla Omowura in *Apala*, adjust their melodies to reflect the natural tonal contours of the language, ensuring that lyrics are semantically intelligible and emotionally expressive (Omolaye, 2014). This practice holds significant implications for choral music, primarily when indigenous languages are used in compositions. To maintain textual clarity and cultural accuracy, conductors must understand the relationship between melody and word tone. Furthermore, Yoruba vocal techniques often employ timbral variation such as nasalisation, chest voice, or falsetto to enhance expressivity. These techniques can be adapted in choral settings to diversify tonal colour and emotional depth.

Unlike the formality and distance often observed in Western concert traditions, Yoruba music highly values communal participation. Audiences are not passive observers; they clap, sing, dance, and sometimes alter the direction of a performance through their responses. This interactive environment also affects leadership styles. The performer-leader attests to the audience's energy and often modifies their gestures, tempo, or dynamics

in real-time based on crowd feedback (Waterman, 1990). This model presents a valuable paradigm for choral conducting in African contexts. Drawing from these traditions, conductors can foster a more responsive and participatory rehearsal and performance environment. For example, rehearsals can include improvisational warm-ups, participatory exercises, or culturally familiar chants. Concert settings may also incorporate gestural invitations to the audience, building a shared performance ethos.

African Art Choral Music, Structure, and Expectations

African art choral music represents a hybrid musical genre that blends Western classical music's structural rigour and harmonic vocabulary with African traditional music's melodic, rhythmic, linguistic, and expressive elements. The creative work of composers such as Fela Sowande, Ayo Bankole, Sam Akpabot, Lazarus Ekwueme, Joshua Uzoigwe, and younger figures like Seun Owoaje and Debo Akinwunmi has shaped the development of African choral music. These composers have crafted works that are stylistically sophisticated yet rooted in African cultural idioms, often drawing inspiration from folk songs, traditional rhythmic patterns, indigenous languages, and philosophical concepts. The resulting compositions are performed in standard choral formats, typically SATB (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and are rehearsed and conducted using methods derived from Western choral pedagogy.

African art choral music is generally written in staff notation, employs Western harmonic progressions, and follows conventional Western forms such as ternary (ABA), rondo, or strophic structures. It often features modulations, polyphonic textures, counterpoint, and dynamic contrasts that require technical mastery and ensemble cohesion. These elements necessitate conductors skilled in Western score reading, rehearsal techniques, and performance interpretation (Adeogun, 2013). Choral conductors in this genre are expected to demonstrate command over beat patterns, tempo control, diction coaching, dynamic shaping, and cueing. The rehearsal process mirrors Western choral traditions, often emphasising sectional drills, voice blending, rhythmic accuracy, and precise intonation. The conducting language, typically conveyed through standardised hand signals, posture, and facial expressions, remains Western mainly in origin, even though the performed repertoire may be deeply African in content.

One of the most distinctive features of African art choral music is its use of indigenous African languages as the primary medium for lyrical content. Composers frequently write in Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Efik, or Tiv, not only as a reflection of cultural identity but also as a vehicle for transmitting philosophical, religious, and social messages. Because many African languages are tonal, composers and conductors must pay close attention to melodic alignment with linguistic tone, ensuring that meaning is not distorted in performance (Nzewi, 2001). This tonal sensitivity presents a unique challenge to conductors who are more familiar with non-tonal European languages. As such, choral

leadership in African art music must encompass linguistic awareness and cultural competence. The conductor must serve as a musical guide and a linguistic interpreter, capable of shaping melodies and vocal articulation to honour the language's semantic and emotive weight.

While the formal structure of African art choral music adheres to classical conventions, its performance aesthetics often draws from indigenous traditions. Many compositions feature African rhythmic idioms such as cross-rhythms, syncopation, ostinato patterns, and irregular meters. These rhythmic features provide a lively, percussive energy to the music characteristic of African expression (Chernoff, 1979). In addition, composers may incorporate African instruments such as drums, shekeres, agidigbo, or gongs as accompaniment or as symbolic allusions to traditional performance settings. While such inclusions may be minimal in formal concert settings, they serve as a reminder of the music's cultural lineage. Conductors must therefore balance maintaining formal choral integrity and honouring these traditional influences. Performances of African art choral music are often marked by heightened emotional expression, gestural freedom, and a deeper connection to cultural ritual and spirituality. However, in many formal contexts, particularly academic or international platforms, these expressive aspects are suppressed in favour of Western stylistic "neutrality." This has led to critiques that African art music is sometimes presented in culturally disembodied ways, lacking the vibrancy of the traditions it seeks to represent (Ekwueme, 1993; Nzewi, 2001).

Most choral conductors in African institutions have been trained in the European tradition, using conducting manuals and methods derived from Western sources (Green, 1981; Schuller, 1997). While this training provides a strong technical foundation, it often neglects African music's expressive tools and cultural logic. For example, the subtle gestural cues Yoruba drummers use to signal phrase changes or tempo shifts are rarely taught in formal conducting classes. As a result, African conductors may feel constrained by a conducting language that does not fully capture the expressive potential of African music. There is, therefore, a growing call for a redefinition of conducting pedagogy in African institutions that integrates traditional African communicative tools such as gesture, movement, vocal inflexion, and audience engagement (Adedeji, 2012; Ogunlade, 2014).

Reimagining Conducting Gesture through Yoruba Performance Aesthetics

The convergence of traditional African music techniques and Western-derived choral art practice provides fertile ground for creative innovation in choral conducting. Rather than viewing these traditions as mutually exclusive, this aligning with both Hutcheon's (2006) principles of creative adaptation and Ossaiga's (2020) framework of conducting dynamism as it proposes a synergistic model where indigenous performance methods are thoughtfully adapted to enhance musical communication, cultural relevance, and expressive leadership in African art choral contexts.

In Yoruba music performance, gesture transcends mere showmanship; it serves a functional and communicative role. Leaders in Apala or Juju ensembles direct tempo, dynamics, and transitions through highly expressive bodily motions such as arm swings, torso shifts, and hand flourishes (Olaniyan, 2013). These gestures are context-specific, culturally embedded, and intuitively understood by ensemble members and audiences. Choral conductors can draw on this gestural vocabulary to expand their expressive toolkit. For example, a conductor might adopt a wide arm arc to indicate a climactic swell (akin to the drummers' cue for ensemble entries) or a deliberate stillness to signal a ritardando or dramatic pause. The physical grammar of Yoruba performance can thus be repurposed in choral conducting to infuse leadership with cultural symbolism and visual dynamism (Ogunlade, 2014). Such gestures direct musical action and communicate emotional content and cultural identity, strengthening musical leadership's embodied nature as Ossaiga's (2020) theory emphasises.

In traditional Yoruba music, ensemble coordination often relies on verbal exclamations and on-the-spot linguistic cues such as "Ká ma lọ!" (let's go!) or "Shébé!" (softly!). These cues function like conductorial directions but are woven into the performative flow (Omolaye, 2014). While Western conducting discourages verbalisation during performance, African choral contexts, particularly informal or community-based ones, can benefit from selective and strategic verbal cues. During rehearsals, conductors may use indigenous proverbs, rhythmic chants, or verbal mnemonics to clarify musical ideas, motivate singers, or inject cultural meaning into technical instruction (Adedeji, 2012). Short, rhythmically timed utterances in live performance can guide dynamics or entrances, especially when working with ensembles less accustomed to formal beat patterns. This integration respects the oral tradition central to African musical pedagogy and facilitates a more direct, immediate connection between conductor and choir.

Movement is integral to Yoruba music, not as a decorative flourish but as an interpretive and symbolic device. Performers in Juju bands often move rhythmically across the stage, using space as part of their communicative strategy (Waterman, 1990). This concept can be reimagined in choral conducting through choreographed entrances, gesture-enhanced cues, and stage blocking reflecting musical dynamics and cultural metaphor. For instance, a conductor might move forward during a crescendo to intensify focus or rotate slightly to acknowledge different choir sections, echoing the rotational leadership seen in traditional drum ensembles. These strategies activate the stage, making the conductor a silent technician and a visible storyteller whose movements narrate the musical arc. Such spatial and kinesthetic awareness helps dissolve the rigid formality of Eurocentric choral presentation, inviting a more theatrical and culturally responsive mode of leadership.

Facial expressivity is an often underutilised yet potent tool in choral conducting. In Yoruba performance, the face is a primary

site of emotional and symbolic communication. Musicians convey meanings, modulate tension, and guide transitions using eye contact, eyebrow movements, smiles, and dramatic facial gestures (Omibiyi-Obidike, 1979). Choral conductors can adapt this technique by using their face to mirror the emotional tone of the music, whether joy, lament, awe, or urgency. Eye contact with individual singers or sections fosters attentiveness and cohesion, while facial gestures can reinforce dynamic shifts or textual interpretation. This aligns with Fuelberth's (2003) advocacy for non-verbal communication in conducting and traditional African performance values, where music is a total body expression.

Yoruba music's call-and-response framework can be creatively restructured within SATB choral forms. Composers may assign "call" phrases to soloists or sectional leads and "responses" to the whole ensemble, preserving the dialogic essence of the tradition. Conductors play a crucial role here by cueing these exchanges with clarity, encouraging contrast in timbre, and reinforcing the rhythmic interplay between leader and chorus. Likewise, polyrhythmic structures common in Juju and Apala can be adapted through vocal layering and rhythmic counterpoint. Conductors must develop rhythmic precision and an ability to differentiate overlapping pulses, guiding the choir through sections of syncopation or alternating time signatures. Such structural adaptations require both musical insight and cultural fluency. The conductor becomes not merely an interpreter of the score but a tradition curator, tasked with maintaining authenticity while translating indigenous structures into contemporary formats (Agawu, 2003).

Hybrid Conducting in African Art Music

African choral conducting is profoundly transforming, particularly within Nigerian art music circles. Conductors are increasingly exploring incorporating traditional Yoruba performance aesthetics into formal choral settings, especially in genres such as Apala and Juju. Long rooted in the Yoruba cultural and religious experience, these genres offer a wealth of rhythmically, visually, and expressively dynamic techniques. This article examines how selected African conductors have embraced this integration and offers insights into the challenges and practical applications of adapting indigenous Yoruba methods into formal conducting frameworks.

Professor Laz Ekwueme, Ayo Bankole, and Joshua Uzoigwe are prominent figures contributing to this evolving approach. Ekwueme's work as a composer and conductor is foundational in African art music. He is renowned for blending Western choral structures with African rhythmic and tonal patterns, employing conducting techniques that reflect Yoruba music's emotive and call-and-response elements (Ekwueme, 1993). Ekwueme's gestural language, for example, often departs from rigid Western conducting forms in favour of more fluid, expressive movements that resonate with indigenous performance values.

Ayo Bankole similarly advanced the hybridisation of conducting practices. While his compositions were deeply grounded in

Western harmonic logic, Bankole preserved the Yoruba tonal language and cultural inflexions in his works. He preferred conductors who could interpret these works technically and contextually, employing gestures and facial expressions that mirrored Yoruba idioms of speech and emotion (Omibiyi, 1979). His compositions often required conductors to go beyond the score, engaging in interpretive practices that captured the spirit and texture of Yoruba orality.

Joshua Uzoigwe approached conducting from a unique vantage point, deeply informed by his background in ethnomusicology. Uzoigwe's conducting was highly performative and often mimetic, borrowing gestures from traditional dance and drumming to cue rhythm, intensity, or phrasing changes. He underscored the performative relationship between the conductor and the ensemble, emphasising the importance of embodiment and movement as communication tools, a philosophy rooted in the kinetic traditions of Yoruba music (Vidal, 2012).

Field observations during a live performance of Yoruba art choral works revealed several practical adaptations of traditional techniques into formal conducting. One such adaptation involved gestures inspired by Yoruba drumming. Conductors used circular wrist motions, clenched fists, and open-palm waves to communicate rhythmic accents and dynamic changes. These gestures, often drawn from the physical vocabulary of master drummers, were effective in cueing expressive nuances, particularly in complex polyrhythmic passages (Olaniyan, 2013).

Another notable adaptation was the incorporation of call-and-response cueing techniques. In many Yoruba musical traditions, leadership is established through gestural calls that prompt responses from the ensemble. In the formal choral context, conductors mimicked this by pointing or nodding toward choir sections, maintaining the conversational quality of traditional music (Odusanya, 2025). Furthermore, subtle dance movements such as weight shifts or traditional postures were employed at key musical junctures to embody rhythm and energise the choir's delivery.

Support for this hybridised approach is found in oral testimonies and academic literature. In an interview, Yomi (2023) explained that verbal cues such as *"Ko maro o were"* (let it be soft) or discreet eyebrow movements were integral to directing expressive delivery during performance. Ogunleye (2023) also emphasised the necessity of "conducting in Yoruba", a phrase that encapsulates the conductor's responsibility to express cultural identity through bodily and musical gesture. These insights align with Hutcheon's (2006) theory of adaptation, which holds that adapted works must retain the spirit of the original while introducing new forms appropriate to their new context. In this sense, incorporating Yoruba performance styles, choral conducting functions as preservation and innovation.

Despite the creative potential of these methods, integrating traditional techniques into formal conducting is not without challenges. One of the key issues is the perceived cultural misalignment within

Western-trained choirs. Some ensemble members, trained in Eurocentric musical traditions, may view indigenous gestures as informal or lacking precision. To address this, conductors introduced pre-performance workshops and contextual lectures explaining each gesture's cultural significance and communicative power.

Another major challenge lies in the lack of formal documentation. Traditional Yoruba conducting practices have been mainly transmitted orally or through performance. To bridge this gap, the researcher documented a lexicon of adapted gestures, including tempo, volume, and expression, drawing on fieldwork and interviews (Odusanya, 2025). These records are valuable resources for future conductors interested in engaging with indigenous methodologies.

A third issue involves the risk of over-dramatisation. Because Yoruba performance is naturally expressive and physical, there is a tendency for some gestures to become exaggerated in formal settings, leading to distraction rather than clarity. Through rehearsal feedback and iterative practice, conductors learned to balance expressiveness and control, ensuring that gestures remained functional while retaining cultural authenticity.

Ultimately, the study of hybrid conducting within African art music demonstrates that tradition and innovation are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are complementary forces that, when properly aligned, yield culturally grounded and musically sophisticated performances. Conductors like Ekwueme, Bankole, and Uzoigwe exemplify this dual commitment. Their work illustrates that conducting in African contexts must engage with the score and the sociocultural realities that inform musical meaning and interpretation.

Thus, incorporating Yoruba traditional performance techniques into formal choral conducting enriches African art music's expressive range and cultural relevance. As this article has shown, verbal cues, gestural adaptations, and rhythmic embodiment offer conductors new tools for communication and interpretation. These practices do not merely embellish the music—they transform it, allowing African choral traditions to evolve while remaining rooted in their indigenous foundations.

Pedagogical and Cultural Implications of Hybrid Conducting in African Art Music

Incorporating indigenous Yoruba musical practices into formal choral conducting expands artistic boundaries and has far-reaching pedagogical and cultural consequences. These implications are vital for rethinking music education in African institutions, reinforcing cultural identity, and navigating the postcolonial legacies embedded in musical performance. As African art music continues to evolve, it becomes increasingly clear that a corresponding shift in educational philosophy and cultural consciousness must support its development.

African music education has historically mirrored Western Conservatory models, often to the detriment of indigenous knowledge systems. Scholars such as Adeogun (2013) and Nzewi (2001) argue

that the colonially inherited curriculum has marginalised traditional African music forms, treating them as folklore or informal expressions rather than sophisticated systems of musical knowledge. This approach has led to generations of African musicians and conductors being trained to prioritise European forms, techniques, and theories, with limited exposure to their cultural traditions.

Integrating traditional Yoruba techniques such as verbal cueing, embodied rhythm, and symbolic gesture into conducting pedagogy calls for a more inclusive and contextually relevant curriculum. Music education programs must move beyond token inclusion of African music to deeply embed indigenous theory, performance practice, and music leadership models into their core. This would mean formalising the study of genres such as Apala and Juju, not merely as historical curiosities but as living traditions that can inform modern choral practice. Teaching students to work with Western and African idioms equips them with a bilingual musical fluency, fostering versatility and cultural competence.

Furthermore, recognising African traditional performance techniques as valid and effective within formal academic settings elevates their status and encourages research, documentation, and innovation. As Odusanya (2025) demonstrates in his application of Apala and Juju gestures in choral performance, these adaptations are both artistically enriching and pedagogically transformative. They challenge educators and students to reconceptualise what it means to be "trained" in music.

Beyond technical instruction, music education also plays a critical role in shaping identity and self-perception. For many African conductors and performers, embodying Western conducting styles exclusively has led to a subtle form of disempowerment, where indigenous modes of expression are undervalued or erased. Hybrid conducting draws on traditional Yoruba practices and provides a powerful counter-narrative that affirms African ways of knowing and being.

Incorporating indigenous conducting techniques helps build confidence in African identity, especially among young musicians and music leaders. When students see their cultural expressions validated in the classroom and on stage, they are more likely to see themselves as legitimate artists and scholars. Traditional cues such as expressive eye contact, call-and-response interaction, and culturally meaningful body language enhance musical performance and reinforce a sense of cultural belonging and pride (Oluniyi, 2014; Yomi, 2023). This re-rooting of musical leadership in African cultural norms has broader social implications. It allows conductors to serve as artistic directors and cultural custodians who preserve, adapt, and transmit indigenous heritage. Such leadership reshapes the narrative of African modernity not as an imitation of the West, but as a dynamic negotiation between tradition and innovation.

At the heart of these pedagogical shifts lies the complex terrain of postcolonial tension. Like much of African education, African choral music operates within a space of

cultural negotiation. The legacy of colonialism is evident in the privileging of Western harmonic systems, conducting techniques, and aesthetic judgments. Consequently, performances of African art music often oscillate between two poles: the desire for Western validation and the impulse toward cultural reclamation.

Hybrid conducting practices offer a productive response to these tensions. By adapting indigenous techniques into formal performance, conductors disrupt the binary of "traditional" versus "modern" and propose a continuum where both coexist. This approach reflects Linda Hutcheon's (2006) theory of adaptation, which emphasises the importance of transformation that retains the spirit of the original while innovating in form. In this case, the spirit of Yoruba music, its rhythm, expressivity, and communal energy, is preserved even as it is reimagined through the lens of choral art music.

Importantly, these adaptations are not acts of nostalgia but resistance and reinvention. They challenge the dominant aesthetic paradigms that have long devalued African performance systems, replacing them with frameworks honouring local knowledge. By legitimising indigenous approaches within formal concerts, conductors also re-educate audiences, many of whom have internalised colonial hierarchies of taste about the richness and relevance of African musical traditions. In sum, the pedagogical and cultural implications of incorporating Yoruba performance techniques into choral conducting are profound. They demand a re-evaluation of educational priorities, a re-centering of African identity in music leadership, and a critical engagement with the postcolonial structures that shape performance practice. As African institutions look to the future, embracing hybrid conducting can catalyse a more inclusive, authentic, and empowering musical culture.

Conclusion

This study has explored the intersection of traditional Yoruba musical practices and formal African art music conducting, revealing a compelling case for hybridisation as an artistic and pedagogical strategy. Key findings highlight how indigenous techniques, such as gestural communication rooted in Yoruba drumming, verbal cueing common in Apala and Juju music, and expressive bodily movements, can effectively adapt to formal choral contexts. These practices enrich ensemble communication, enhance cultural authenticity, and offer more engaging performance experiences for performers and audiences. The work of conductors like Laz Ekwueme, Ayo Bankole, and Joshua Uzoigwe exemplifies the potential of culturally grounded conducting to bridge traditional and contemporary musical worlds while affirming African identities.

The findings also underline the need to reconsider the structure and content of music education in African institutions. Current curricula often marginalise indigenous knowledge in favour of Western traditions, a legacy of colonial influence that continues to shape teaching, performance, and research. This study advocates for a shift toward inclusive music pedagogy that formally

recognises African conducting practices as valid, research-worthy, and performance-ready. Such an approach promotes artistic diversity and empowers African musicians to develop leadership skills rooted in their cultural heritage.

In light of the study's outcomes, there is a strong call for further research and performance experimentation. Future studies might explore adapting other African regional traditions into choral conducting or develop a standardised system for codifying traditional gestural languages. Ethnographic studies could also provide richer insights into how community-based performance practices can inform institutional music training. Live concerts and experimental workshops should be encouraged to test, refine, and popularise these hybrid methods in real-world settings.

Based on the study's conclusions, several recommendations emerge for key stakeholders. Conductors must approach music leadership as a culturally informed act, integrating technical precision with expressive depth drawn from indigenous traditions. Educators should revise music curricula to incorporate African performance theory and praxis, enabling students to engage with local and global traditions critically. For policymakers, support is needed to fund research, curriculum development, and performance initiatives that reflect and promote Africa's rich musical diversity. By investing in culturally responsive music education and practice, African nations can cultivate a new generation of globally competitive conductors deeply rooted in their heritage.

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