

REIMAGINING AFRICAN PIANISM: A DIALOGICAL INQUIRY INTO ONYEJI'S DRUMMISTIC COMPOSITIONAL PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

Although African pianism holds profound cultural depth and creative ingenuity, it remains largely unexplored within mainstream musicology. Its rhythmic and structural innovations are often overshadowed by Eurocentric compositional models, leaving a critical gap in the understanding of non-Western musical thought. This study responds to that gap through a dialogical inquiry into Christian Onyeji's *Drummistic Composition Technique*, a compositional philosophy grounded in the structural logic of indigenous drumming. Framed by Episto-Musical Pedagogy theory and aligned with Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDG) 4 - Quality Education, the research advances culturally responsive pedagogy and epistemic diversity in music education. It explores how Onyeji's technique reimagines composition through pulse, repetition, and communal memory, offering a rhythmic epistemology that challenges dominant notions of authorship, form, and curriculum. Using a qualitative, interpretive design, data were collected via a structured written interview and were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's framework. The findings reveal that *Drummistic Composition* not only embodies indigenous musical knowledge but also extends and resolves earlier theoretical postulations by Euba. The interview functions as both testimony and theory, serving as a living archive of African compositional thought. This research contributes to decolonial musicology and invites further inquiry into curriculum reform and intercultural composition rooted in indigenous epistemologies.

Keywords: African Pianism, Decoloniality, Dialogical Inquiry, *Drummistic Composition*, Epistemology, Rhythm

INTRODUCTION

In the quiet pulse of a village drum, generations have encoded memory, meaning, and method. For many African communities, rhythm is not merely a musical element; it is a way of knowing, a language of continuity, and a vessel of cultural sovereignty. Yet within global musicology, African pianism, particularly its rhythmic philosophies, remains underrepresented and often misunderstood. Despite its creative ingenuity and cultural depth, African pianism continues to be overshadowed by Eurocentric compositional frameworks, leaving a critical gap in the theorization and pedagogy of non-Western musical thought (Onyeji, 2008; Nzewi, 1999).

This study addresses that gap through a focused dialogue with Christian C. U. Onyeji, whose *Drummistic Composition Technique* translates indigenous drumming logic into a structured approach for piano composition. His method challenges Western norms of authorship and form, while building on the works of African theorists like Akin Euba and Meki Nzewi (Euba, 1989; Onyeji, 2016).

Onyeji, a professor of music and a leading scholar at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, holds a Doctor of Music from the University of Pretoria. His contributions to African pianism and choral music are widely recognized, and his technique stands out for its cultural authenticity and pedagogical relevance (Onyeji, 2008).

Guided by **Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory** (Authority, 2025), this research supports Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 - **Quality Education**, by promoting inclusive, culturally responsive music education. Using a qualitative, interpretive approach, the study draws on a structured written interview and applies Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to explore Onyeji's insights.

The study aims to unpack the foundations and creative logic of *Drummistic Composition*. Examine how it challenges and expands Western compositional norms, with implications for decolonial music education.

The article is organized into five sections: Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, Methodology, Findings and Discussion, and Conclusion, each building toward a deeper understanding of Onyeji's work and its impact on global music discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

African pianism, introduced by Akin Euba, blends African rhythmic and melodic traditions with Western piano techniques, creating a unique intercultural style (Euba, 1989). His work, *Scenes from Traditional Life*, for example, showcases this fusion by embedding African drumming patterns into classical forms.

Despite its innovation, African pianism is still sidelined in mainstream musicology. Scholars often focus on performance rather than its deeper theoretical and pedagogical dimensions (Omojola, 2006). Nzewi (1999), emphasized the need to engage African musical logic and philosophy in education; a call that Christian Onyeji answers through his *Drummistic* Composition Technique, a method that translates indigenous drumming structures into piano composition (Onyeji, 2008, 2016).

Onyeji's approach goes beyond Euba's intercultural blending. It uses African rhythmic syntax, pulse, repetition, and communal memory as the foundation of composition, challenging Western ideas of form and authorship (Onyeji, 2008). His work aligns with Nzewi's view of music as a medium for social and philosophical expression (Nzewi, 2003).

Rhythm in African traditions is more than timing; it's a way of knowing. Scholars like Chernoff (1979) and Agawu (2003) show how drumming encodes memory, relationships, and spirituality. Onyeji builds on this by treating rhythm as the core of musical structure, offering a model that reflects African communal and cyclical thinking.

Calls to decolonize music education are growing, with scholars urging the inclusion of indigenous knowledge and the dismantling of Eurocentric curricula (Hebert, 2018; Olorunyomi, 2013). Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory (Authority, 2025) supports this shift by centering indigenous sound traditions and rhythmic epistemologies. It provides a lens to view Onyeji's technique not just as innovation, but as a tool for curriculum reform.

However, most studies on African pianism rely on external analysis, missing the composer's own voice. This study addresses that gap by engaging directly with Onyeji through a structured interview, treating his reflections as both testimony and theory and offering fresh insight into African composition and pedagogy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by **Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory**, a decolonial framework developed by Albert Authority. It positions music, especially rhythm, storytelling, and performance, as central to how African communities pass down knowledge, values, and history. Rather than treating music as a supplement to education, the theory sees it as a primary way of knowing rooted in African worldviews.

The study uses a **qualitative, interpretive approach**, treating the interview with Christian Onyeji not just as data, but as a space for generating theory. This aligns with the theory's focus on lived experience and cultural sovereignty as valid sources of knowledge.

Episto-Musical Pedagogy theory is especially relevant here because:

1. It aligns with Onyeji's use of indigenous rhythmic logic in composition.
2. It treats his reflections as both personal insight and theoretical contribution.
3. It supports curriculum reform that values indigenous epistemologies.

In short, this framework helps interpret Onyeji's '*Drummistic*' Composition Technique as both a creative method and a pedagogical tool that challenges dominant models and restores cultural authority to African musical traditions.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive approach centered on the voice and legacy of Christian Onyeji, renowned Nigerian composer and creator of the *Drummistic* Composition Technique. The research is based on a structured written interview, treated not just as data collection but as a collaborative space for generating theory. Onyeji's lived experience, creative insights, and cultural knowledge were captured in his own words, with informed consent and full transparency.

Onyeji was purposefully selected for his deep engagement with African art music and indigenous rhythmic traditions. His technique, which translates African drumming logic into piano composition, provided a rich foundation for exploring themes like conceptual origins, compositional strategies, pedagogy, rhythmic syntax, and philosophical intent.

The interview, conducted via a secure digital platform, lasted approximately ninety minutes. Responses were recorded in writing, preserving Onyeji's tone and emphasis to honor the expressive nature of indigenous knowledge.

Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis guided the interpretation, identifying patterns that aligned with Episto-Musical Pedagogy theory. Special attention was given to how Onyeji's reflections embodied rhythmic ways of knowing, through pulse, repetition, and communal memory.

To ensure credibility, the researcher used member checking, sharing interpretations with Onyeji for feedback and clarification. Reflexive journaling and peer debriefing helped track the researcher's perspective and decisions. Ultimately, the interview served as both a source of insight and a living archive of African compositional thought, inviting ongoing dialogue and educational transformation.

FINDINGS

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of thematic analysis, the researcher engaged Professor Christian Onyeji's written interview as both testimony and theory. Initial familiarization with the transcript revealed a rich interplay of rhythmic, philosophical, and pedagogical reflections. Through systematic coding, key phrases and concepts were identified, such as 'drumming logic,' 'notation,' 'communal rhythm,' and 'African pianism', which were then grouped into broader thematic categories.

(a.) Presentation of Data: The Raw Interview Script

Interview with Christian C. U. Onyeji on *Drummistic Piano Technique*

[Focus: Exploring the conceptual, compositional, and pedagogical dimensions of *Drummistic Composition*]

Conceptual Origins – Cultural Reclamation

Q1: What inspired you to develop *Drummistic Composition* as a way of translating Indigenous rhythmic consciousness to the piano?

Christian Onyeji: The need for a distinct creative technique and style in African Art Music has long occupied the minds of African composers. While the piano is widely recognized as a percussive instrument, especially in the works of Steve Reich and others, Akin Euba's concept of African Pianism, though influential, is quite broad. It tends to accommodate all forms of African music written for the piano. I felt it was necessary to develop a more specific technique, one that draws directly from Africa's rich drumming traditions. *Drummistic Composition* emerged from years of creative practice. It simulates the techniques of African membrane and slit drums, offering a focused and culturally grounded approach to piano composition.

Q2: How do you define 'indigenous rhythmic consciousness' in your work, and which cultural elements are most central to your interpretation?

Christian Onyeji: Rhythmic consciousness is something we're all born with, it's the natural ability to articulate rhythm. But it becomes sharper through practice, study, and understanding. In my case, I draw heavily from the musical traditions of the Igbo people of Nigeria, where I come from. The Igbo culture is incredibly rich in musical complexity and creativity. Its rhythmic language is diverse, exciting, and deeply rooted in communal life.

Q3: In what ways does *Drummistic Composition* serve as a form of cultural preservation or reclamation?

Christian Onyeji: Many of my works simulate musical idioms and creative elements from various African cultures. This isn't just stylistic, it's a way of continuing Indigenous music practices. In doing so, the technique becomes a form of cultural preservation and reclamation.

Q4: Are there specific traditional drumming practices or communities that influence your conceptual framework?

Christian Onyeji: Yes, absolutely. My creative thinking and compositions are deeply inspired by the drumming practices of Indigenous Igbo music.

Compositional Strategies – Rhythmic Simulation

Q1: How do you simulate ensemble drumming within a solo piano context?

Christian Onyeji: This approach has evolved through years of creative experience. My simulations follow the melodic-rhythmic concepts found in African percussive performance, particularly as discussed by Meki Nzewi. It's about capturing the essence of ensemble drumming within the limitations of a single instrument.

Q2: Could you elaborate on your use of rhythmic layering and metric modulation?

Christian Onyeji: Metric modulation is a Western concept; it's not typically part of African creative practice. In African music, changing meter across different movements or sections doesn't equate to metric modulation. I don't consciously apply that in my work. As for rhythmic layering, I use it when it serves the composition. It's not formulaic, it's intuitive.

Q3: What challenges do you face when adapting polyrhythmic textures to the piano?

Christian Onyeji: Honestly, I don't find it challenging. My background as a performer and composer across various genres has equipped me to handle polyrhythmic textures with ease. It's second nature to me.

Q4: Are there particular pieces where your Drummistic Technique is most fully realized?

Christian Onyeji: All my piano and solo-piano works employ this technique. Each piece is unique in its own way, and each reflects the principles of *Drummistic* Composition.

Pedagogical Intentions – Experiential Pedagogy

Q1: You've described rhythm as a 'live experience.' How do you instill that mindset in your students?

Christian Onyeji: I encourage them through discussion and motivation. I urge them to explore rhythm beyond the page. Many students engage with this concept at different levels of understanding and creativity.

Q2: What teaching methods help students internalize rhythm beyond notation?

Christian Onyeji: I involve them in creative activities and give them space to explore. But it's not easy; many students are deeply rooted in Western approaches and struggle to break away. I let them make their own creative choices and find their path.

Q3: How do students trained in Western classical traditions respond to the Drummistic approach?

Christian Onyeji: It's not an easy transition. Many don't know how to begin. Some struggle with the concept. Change is difficult, and not everyone adapts quickly.

Q4: Do you see Drummistic pedagogy as a bridge between performance and cultural identity?

Christian Onyeji: Certainly. Teaching *Drummistic* piano composition, and performance is a powerful way to reconnect with our Indigenous creative cultures. It brings our identity to the forefront. The goal has always been to develop an African Art Music style that reflects who we are. *Drummistic* Composition is one method for the piano; there are others, but it's a meaningful step toward cultural affirmation.

(b.) Analytical Process: Using Braun and Clarke's Six-Phase Framework

The stages of Braun and Clarke's six-phase model of thematic analysis as applied to this study are: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Each phase is contextualized to reflect how the interview transcript was engaged as both testimony and theory:

Familiarization with the Data: The researcher began by immersing Onyeji's written interview responses, reading and re-reading the transcript to absorb the cadence, emphasis, and philosophical depth of his reflections. This phase was crucial for recognizing the rhythmic and conceptual patterns embedded in his language, particularly his references to pulse, repetition, and communal memory as compositional tools.

Generating Initial codes: Key phrases and ideas were systematically coded, such as drumming logic, African pianism, notation strategies, and pedagogical intentions. These codes captured both technical and epistemological dimensions of *Drummistic* Composition, allowing the researcher to trace how Onyeji's technique challenges conventional Western frameworks.

Searching for Themes: The initial codes were grouped into broader thematic categories. Emergent themes included: Rhythmic Syntax, Compositional Strategies, Philosophical Underpinnings, Pedagogical Intentions, Conceptual Origin, Notation Strategies. These themes align with the objectives of Espito-Musical Pedagogy theory and the study's decolonial aims.

Reviewing Themes: Themes were refined by cross-checking them against the full transcript and ensuring they were coherent, distinct, and supported by multiple instances in Onyeji's responses. This phase confirmed that the themes were not imposed but emerged organically from the participant's own articulation of his philosophy.

Naming and Defining Themes: Each theme was clearly defined and named to reflect its conceptual weight. For example:

- *Rhythmic Syntax:* Reflecting the structural logic of African drumming as a compositional foundation, this theme embodies the theory's emphasis on rhythm as a cognitive and epistemic tool.
- *Compositional Strategies:* Highlighting Onyeji's methods for translating Indigenous rhythmic patterns into piano composition, this theme supports the theory's call for culturally grounded creative processes.
- *Philosophical Underpinnings:* Revealing the ontological and ethical dimensions of *Drummistic* Composition, this theme aligns with the theory's framing of music as a vessel of cosmological wisdom.
- *Pedagogical Intentions:* Demonstrating how Onyeji's technique serves educational purposes, this theme resonates with the theory's advocacy for curriculum reform and teacher training rooted in Indigenous knowledge.
- *Conceptual Origin:* Tracing the genesis of *Drummistic* Composition, this theme affirms the theory's valorization of lived experience and intellectual sovereignty.

- *Notation Strategies*: Addressing the adaptation of Western notation to Indigenous rhythmic logic, this theme reflects the theory’s challenge to colonial musical literacies.

These definitions were informed by both the data and the theoretical lens of Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory.

Producing the Report: The final phase involved weaving the themes into a coherent narrative that honored Onyeji’s voice while advancing scholarly insight. The findings were presented as both empirical data and a theoretical contribution, positioning the interview as a living archive of African compositional thought. The report emphasized how *Drummistic* Composition extends and resolves earlier postulations by Akin Euba, while offering new directions for curriculum reform and intercultural pedagogy.

(c.) Thematic Coding: Synthesis of Results

Table 1.

Showing Identified Themes and Frequencies

Source: Structured written interview with Professor Christian Onyeji.

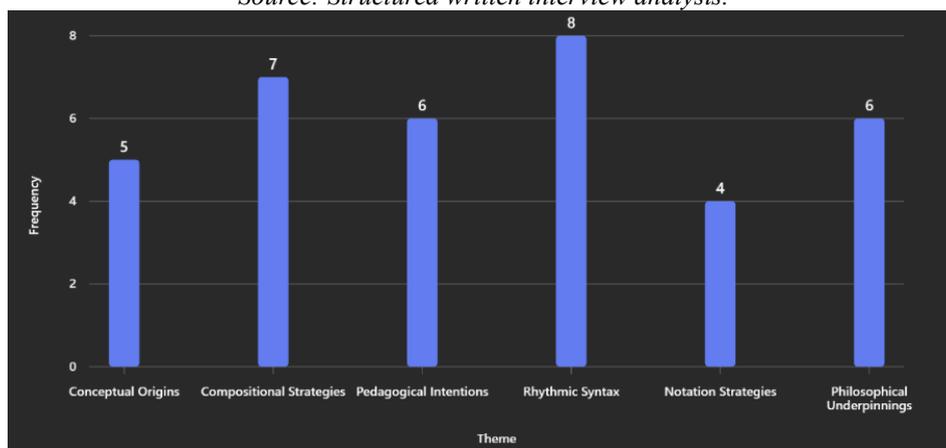
Theme	Frequency
Conceptual Origins	5
Compositional Strategies	7
Pedagogical Intentions	6
Rhythmic Syntax	8
Notation Strategies	4
Philosophical Underpinnings	6

The highest frequency was observed in Rhythmic Syntax, indicating the centrality of rhythmic logic in Onyeji’s compositional philosophy. Compositional Strategies and Pedagogical Intentions also featured prominently, underscoring the dual focus on creative practice and educational reform.

Figure 1.

Visual Representations of the Frequency of Themes

Source: Structured written interview analysis.

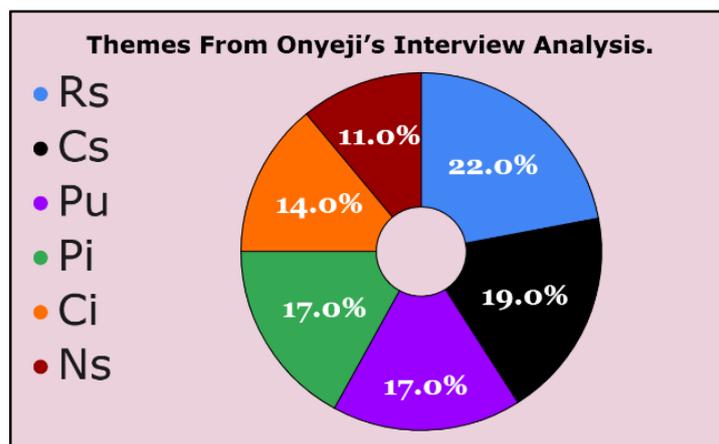


The bar chart illustrates the relative emphasis placed on each theme during the interview. Rhythmic Syntax dominates, followed by Compositional Strategies, highlighting the technical and structural priorities in Onyeji’s discourse.

Figure 2.

Pie Chart Showing Distribution of Themes / Source: Structured written interview analysis.

The themes represented are Rhythmic syntax (**Rs**), Compositional strategies (**Cs**), Philosophical underpinnings (**Pu**), Pedagogical intentions (**Pi**), Conceptual origin (**Ci**), and Notation strategies (**Ns**).



Rhythmic syntax accounts for the largest segment, reinforcing its foundational role in Drummistic Composition. Conceptual Origins and Notation Strategies occupy smaller portions, suggesting they are important but less elaborate compared to rhythmic and pedagogical concerns.

(d.) Key Observations from Thematic Analysis

- (i.) *Conceptual Origins:* Onyeji situates his technique within indigenous drumming traditions, framing composition as an extension of communal rhythmic practices rather than individual authorship.
- (ii.) *Compositional Strategies:* Emphasis on pulse, repetition, and call-and-response structures reflects a deliberate translation of drumming syntax into pianistic idioms.
- (iii.) *Pedagogical Intentions:* The technique is positioned as a tool for decolonizing music education, advocating for epistemic diversity and culturally responsive curricula aligned with SDG 4.
- (iv.) *Rhythmic Syntax:* Central to the philosophy is the notion of rhythm as epistemology, knowledge encoded in pulse and communal memory, challenging Western metric hierarchies.
- (v.) *Notation Strategies:* Innovative approaches to notation aim to capture the fluidity and polyrhythmic complexity of African drumming within the constraints of Western staff notation.
- (vi.) *Philosophical Underpinnings:* The technique embodies a decolonial stance, rejecting Eurocentric paradigms of authorship and form, and affirming indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate sources of theory.

DISCUSSION

Christian Onyeji's interview highlights a compositional approach grounded in indigenous African rhythmic traditions. His work builds on Akin Euba's concept of African pianism and contributes meaningfully to decolonial musicology and curriculum reform.

(a) Building on Euba's African Pianism

Akin Euba's African pianism aimed to blend African musical idioms with Western piano techniques, preserving cultural authenticity (Omojola, 1995; Heile, 2024). His compositions, like *Scenes from Traditional Life*, used Yoruba drumming patterns but remained stylistically exploratory (Omojola, 2013).

Onyeji takes this further with his **Drummistic Composition Technique**, which formalizes African rhythmic structures, like pulse, repetition, and call-and-response, into a clear system for piano composition (Onyeji, 2008). Unlike Euba, Onyeji offers a replicable method rooted in African musical logic, making African pianism a practical and teachable framework.

(b) Rhythm as Knowledge and Decolonial Practice

Onyeji treats rhythm not just as a musical element but as a way of knowing, deeply tied to community memory and embodied tradition (Chernoff, 1991; Agawu, 1995). This challenges Western music's focus on harmony and individual authorship, aligning instead with decolonial critiques of originality and ownership (Pooley, 2018; Agawu, 2025).

His technique supports decolonial musicology by restoring indigenous knowledge to the center of music education (Authority, 2025). It echoes **Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory**, which sees music as a vehicle for ethical and cosmological wisdom (Authority, 2025).

(c) Educational Impact and Curriculum Change

Onyeji's method is both creative and educational. It promotes culturally relevant teaching and supports **Sustainable Development Goal 4** on inclusive education (Onyeji, 2008; Authority, 2025). By challenging the dominance of Western classical music in African institutions, it pushes for cognitive justice and intercultural understanding.

(d) Cultural Sovereignty and Innovation

Philosophically, Onyeji's work asserts that African music doesn't need to imitate Western forms to be valid. Instead, it can innovate from within its own traditions (Bolaji, 2019). This challenges the idea that non-Western music is static or secondary, showing that African musical thought is dynamic and globally relevant.

In summary, Onyeji's *Drummistic* Composition Technique transforms Euba's vision into a structured, culturally grounded practice. It advances decolonial musicology, reclaims indigenous knowledge in education, and offers a model of intercultural composition that is collaborative, not hierarchical.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Christian Onyeji's *Drummistic* Composition Technique is more than a creative approach to piano writing. It offers a new way of thinking about African music, one that begins with indigenous drumming traditions and treats rhythm as shared knowledge passed through community memory. By translating pulse, repetition, and call-and-response into piano composition, Onyeji demonstrates that African musical logic can guide both creative work and academic inquiry.

The findings also point to wider implications. For scholars, this technique provides a clear framework for studying African pianism through its own cultural principles rather than through Western assumptions. It invites new research on rhythm, notation, and authorship grounded in indigenous epistemologies. For policymakers, the study highlights the need to support cultural sustainability by recognizing African musical knowledge as a legitimate intellectual resource. Such recognition strengthens national and regional policies on arts education, cultural heritage, and creative industries.

For curriculum reform, Onyeji's method offers a practical model for decolonizing music programs. It aligns with SDG 4 by promoting inclusive and culturally relevant learning, and it encourages institutions to rethink what counts as "core" musical knowledge. Integrating *Drummistic* Composition into teaching can help students understand African music from within its own worldview, rather than as an add-on to Western theory.

For music pedagogy, the technique provides teachers with a structured way to introduce African rhythmic thinking in the classroom. It shows that rhythm is not only a musical tool but also a carrier of identity, memory, and community values. This approach encourages learners to see music as a living practice connected to culture, not just a technical skill.

Overall, this study argues that African pianism becomes stronger and more meaningful when expressed through its own epistemic logic. Onyeji's work demonstrates that African musical traditions do not need external validation. When grounded in indigenous knowledge, they stand as complete, innovative, and globally relevant systems of thought.

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