



From Village Square to Concert Hall: Recasting Igbo Folk Music Through Conventional Art Music Techniques

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Abstract

Igbo folk music continues to play a vital role in the cultural archive for the preservation of history, identity, values, and communal memory of the Igbo people. However, because Igbo folk music has a strong dependency on oral tradition for its transmission and preservation, it has become vulnerable in today's world that is shaped by urbanization, digital culture, and the decline of communal performance space. This article, therefore, explores how Igbo folk music can be recast through conventional art music techniques without losing its cultural essence. It delves into the discourse of the musical features of Igbo folk music and considers how these features can be developed through thematic transformation, SATB choral writing, among other techniques. Drawing on recent African music scholarship and Nigerian art music studies, the article argues that Igbo folk music can be preserved and can gain wider cultural visibility, which will support artistic renewal and engage more academic study when recast for the concert hall. It concludes that this transformation can extend rather than erase the indigenous musical identity when handled with cultural sensitivity.

Keywords: African Art Music, Conventional Art Music Technique, Cultural Preservation, Igbo Folk Music, Musical Recasting



Introduction

Igbo folk music plays a central role in the life of the Igbo people. Aside from its entertainment role, Igbo folk music serves as a medium through which the community remembers its history, celebrations, education, initiation, and other values they hold dear. Igbo folk music is tied to both the social and cultural life of the Igbos.

Historically, the village square is one of the most important spaces where the Igbo people meet for musical performance, wrestling, and other important events. It is widely known as *Ama*. It is a place where performances of different kinds take place, such as dance, drama, storytelling, music, and important instructions. In such places, communal participation is inevitable. People take part in performance through clapping, dancing, and responding with reverence. In a nutshell, audiences are rarely passive. This explains why Igbo folk music is considered not merely as sound, but as a communal activity. Recent studies on Igbo folk music continue to show that such songs carry social meaning within Igbo life, as well as identity, memory, and education (Ibekwe & Ojukwu, 2019; Ibekwe & Ezeanyim, 2023).

However, those conditions, events, and celebrations that enabled and sustained the Igbo folk music traditions are no longer what they used to be. Urbanization, change in religious practices, migration, and the dominance of popular music have made traditional communal performance almost impossible. The emergence of phones and media platforms has even worsened the situation, as many young people are more exposed to global music than they are to the folk music of their indigenous communities. Also, because Igbo folk songs are orally transmitted, their survival depends heavily on memory, repetition, and communal practice. The absence of the conditions that made them possible has weakened and made Igbo folk music vulnerable. Adesoji (2023) rightly notes that music remains an important medium for the preservation of culture in Nigeria's digital era, though digital culture can have both good and bad effects on indigenous practices.

This situation points to the fact that there is a need for more creative approaches to be taken towards the preservation of Igbo folk music. As much as documentation has its place, preservation should not stop at recording and archiving. One practical and productive way of keeping Igbo folk music alive is by recasting it within contemporary art music frameworks.

By using conventional art music techniques, folk materials can be adapted for the modern-day concert setting while retaining their cultural identity. In this light, the paper explores the recasting or reimagining of Igbo folk music from the village square to the concert hall, considering how indigenous musical elements of Igbo folk music can be developed through art music techniques without losing their cultural identity, and how this transformation can contribute to cultural preservation, artistic innovation, and global visibility of Igbo musical heritage.



Conceptual Clarifications

Igbo Folk Music

Igbo folk music refers to the traditional music of the Igbo people that forms their indigenous musical expression, rooted in their everyday life. Folk music is indigenous to every culture, and it has always been recalled and transmitted orally from one generation to another (Ugoo–Okonkwo & Erhiegueke, 2025). Igbo folk music is functional, communal, and orally transmitted. When it comes to its functionality, it plays different roles such as entertainment, worship, celebration, education, and even preservation of communal memory. It is not an art that is outside the life of the people but is deeply interwoven both in the social and cultural life of the people.

The musical characteristics of Igbo folk music include call-and-response pattern, repetitive phrases, rhythmic vitality, tonal language inflection, communal participation, and close links between music, dance, gestures, and context. Furthermore, Ibekwe and Ojukwu (2019) discuss the educational and creative value of Igbo folk music for children, while Ibekwe and Ezeanyim (2023) showcase how Igbo folk music carries the theme of social identity, community memory, and cultural meaning. These works point to Igbo folk music as a living social practice rather than an independent art.

African Art Music

African art music may be understood as a modern compositional practice or platform where African musical materials interact with formal techniques that are often associated with Western art music. It should be seen as interaction and not copying. Recent scholarship on Nigerian art music has continued to emphasize that African art composition must remain connected to African cultural experience.

Elueme and Jayeola (2023) argue that art music composition in Nigeria should not merely imitate Western models but should draw meaningfully from African culture, history, and performance contexts. In the same light, Onyeji (2019) explains that indigenous African musical paradigms can serve as a strong foundation for contemporary art music composition when handled with understanding and creativity.

Additionally, Agawu (2023) demonstrates the intellectual depth of African musical techniques and the need to treat African music as a serious field of theory, creativity, and scholarship.

Musical Recasting

Musical recasting refers to the process of re-imagining existing musical materials to give them a new form or setting. In the context of this article, musical recasting means taking Igbo folk music and developing it into a structured art music composition. This involves arranging folk tunes for SATB choir, expanding the melody, and using folk motifs as a basis for new composition.



Recasting does not imply destroying the original identity of the song but carefully giving it a new performance life. The challenge is to transform without erasing, to expand without distorting, and to make the music suitable for formal concert performance without losing its cultural identity. The process, therefore, should be creative and culturally responsible at the same time.

Cultural Preservation

Cultural preservation simply refers to the conscious effort geared towards the safeguarding and transmission of a people's heritage from one generation to another. In music, preservation can occur through any of the following means: oral transmission, notation, recording, teaching, performance, archiving, and creative adaptation. The preservation of Igbo folk music is especially urgent because many traditional songs are tied to communal practices, and these practices are no longer as frequent as they used to be.

According to Ezugwu (2024), cultural preservation and transformation through musical arts education play an indispensable role in strengthening cultural diversity, identity, community cohesion, and historical memory. This is important in this particular context because recasting Igbo folk music is not about making old songs sound new but creating a pathway and a framework through which music can remain teachable, performable, and meaningful to new generations.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two theories: Alan P. Merriam's Theory of Music as Culture and Akin Euba's Theory of African Art Music/Intercultural Composition.

Alan P. Merriam's Theory of Music as Culture

Alan P. Merriam's Theory of Music as Culture was propounded in his book *The Anthropology of Music*, published in 1964. Merriam argues that music should not be studied only as sound, melody, rhythm, or performance. Rather, music should be understood as a cultural product that is connected to the ideas, behaviour, and values of the people who produce it. His model explains music through three related areas: concept, behaviour, and sound. Concept refers to what people think and believe about music; behaviour refers to how people perform, use, and respond to music; while sound refers to the actual musical material itself. This means that music cannot be separated from the society that gives it meaning. Northwestern University Press also describes Merriam's work as one that shows that music is a form of social behaviour and should not be separated from its cultural context.

This theory fits the present study because Igbo folk music is not treated merely as a collection of melodies. It is viewed as a cultural practice that carries memory, history, identity, education,



entertainment, communal participation, and social values. In the traditional Igbo setting, folk music relates to the village square, festivals, work, worship, storytelling, dance, and communal response. Therefore, in recasting Igbo folk music for the concert hall, the composer must not focus only on harmony, notation, SATB writing, or counterpoint. The cultural meaning of music must also be protected.

Akin Euba's Theory of African Art Music and Intercultural Composition.

Akin Euba was a Nigerian composer and musicologist whose ideas centred on the creation of modern African art music from indigenous African musical materials. His theory holds that African composers can use African musical elements such as rhythm, melody, language, performance style, instrumental colour, and traditional idioms as the basis for modern composition. Euba's idea is not about copying Western classical music but about allowing African musical materials to interact creatively with formal compositional techniques.

This theory fits well with the present study because the article is concerned with moving Igbo folk music from the village square to the concert hall through conventional art music techniques. Techniques such as thematic development, reharmonization, counterpoint, motivic transformation, and SATB choral arrangement are not used to erase the Igbo identity of the music. Rather, they are used to give music a new artistic life.

Methodology

This study adopts a combination of descriptive, analytical, and creative approaches. While the descriptive aspect explains the cultural and musical features of Igbo folk music, the analytical aspect highlights those features that can be developed through conventional art music techniques. Then, the creative aspect considers how such features can be adapted into formal composition.

The study draws insights from existing scholarly works on African music, Igbo folk music, and cultural preservation, as well as from African art music. It also explores the general practice of Nigerian art music composers who have worked with indigenous materials.

The melody, rhythm, form, language, texture, call-and-response structure, and harmonic possibilities were carefully attended to. The central theme here is not merely to describe Igbo folk music, but to show how it can be transformed for concert use without losing its cultural identity or essence.

In this light and to achieve the objectives of this study, the article focuses on compositional techniques such as thematic development, counterpoint, reharmonization, motivic transformation, formal restructuring, as well as SATB choral writing.



Distinctive Musical Characteristics of Igbo Folk Music

Call-and-Response Structure

One of the most prominent features of Igbo folk music is its call-and-response structure. The predominant feature of this structure is that a leader (the soloist) initiates a phrase (call) while the group (chorus/choir) responds, either by singing the exact phrase as the leader or a complementary one (Agu, 2024). This pattern encourages participation and creates a sense of dialogue between the person leading the song and the responding group, or even the participating community, reflecting the communal nature of Igbo social life.

In art music composition, call-and-response patterns can be adopted through antiphonal writing, solo and chorus exchange, sectional dialogue between voice parts, or even through instrumental imitation. For example, a soprano line can present a melodic idea in a call pattern, while the alto, tenor, and bass voices respond with a refrain. This shows that call-and-response patterns are suitable for choral and ensemble writing.

Additionally, Addaquay (2025) gives a similar explanation that call-and-response within African musical performance supports cooperation, leadership, and communal musical interaction.

Rhythmic Vitality and Polyrythmic Organisation

Igbo folk music embodies a strong rhythmic drive, derived mostly from clapping, drumming, dance movements, and the layering of rhythmic patterns. Some recent works on West African polyrhythm explain that traditional West African music combines songs with dance, percussive instruments, and movement, forming a larger rhythmic and social experience.

In the performance of Igbo folk music, this integration is also vital, where rhythm is embodied through movement and participation. When recasting Igbo folk music for concert performance, these rhythmic qualities may be developed through the use of ostinato patterns, syncopation, cross-rhythms, body percussion, instrumental accompaniment, or rhythmic counterpoint among voice parts.

Melodic Structure and Tonal Language Influence

Igbo language is tonal in nature; the pitch direction affects the meaning of a particular word. A single word can have different meanings depending on how it sounds. As a result, melody and text must be carefully aligned during composition because the meaning of a word can be distorted if the composer ignores the tonal inflection. Agawu (2023) emphasizes that great importance should be given to African musical techniques on their own terms, which includes sensitivity to tonal inflection as well as the relationship between musical sound and cultural meaning.



In this light, the recasting of Igbo folk music must respect the natural rise and fall of Igbo words. The melodic line must support the tonal inflection to maintain cultural authenticity in the concert arrangement.

Cyclic Form and Repetition

Another major feature of Igbo folk music is repetition. Short phrases are usually repeated with slight variations or in exact form, which allows performers to improvise and listeners to easily participate. Repetition here should not be seen as a lack of developmental ability, but to create continuity, stability, and communal immersion.

In concert composition, repetition can be developed through theme and variation. It can also be developed through motivic expansion, gradual textural growth, and sectional repetition. Additionally, a short folk phrase can become the foundation for a longer composition.

Participatory Performance Practice

During the performance of Igbo folk music in the traditional setting, the boundary between performers and audience dissolves. The audience becomes participants, usually by clapping, dancing, or by singing the refrain. This participatory spirit is what makes Igbo folk music socially meaningful.

This implies that, when adapting Igbo folk music for the concert hall, efforts should be made to keep alive the participatory spirit through repeated refrains and antiphonal sections. Ezugwu (2024) emphasized that musical art education should reflect local cultural practices, including songs, dance, instrumentation, and performance, instead of separating the music from the community where it derives its meaning.

Functional and Contextual Nature

Almost every Igbo folk song is tied to a specific social function. In the Igbo traditional setting, there are songs for work, relaxation, ritual, lullaby, festivals, and funerals, to mention but a few. This implies that the meaning of Igbo folk music is not found only in the melody and rhythm, but also in the context.

Therefore, when moving Igbo folk songs to the concert hall, the composer or performer should provide enough contextual awareness so that the audience can understand the cultural background of the work. Programme notes, translations, introductions, and even mini dramas can be staged during the rendition to create a better cultural context for better understanding.



Conventional Art Music Techniques for Recasting Igbo Folk Music

Thematic Development

Thematic development is the art of taking a short melodic idea and expanding it by using repetition, sequence, variation, fragmentation, augmentation, or diminution. Because Igbo folk music contains short, memorable motifs, this technique is very useful in the recasting of Igbo folk music.

By applying thematic development, a composer can introduce a folk tune in its original form and then gradually transform it without losing the basic feature of the melody. In the Excerpt below (Figure 1), the researcher applied thematic development by expanding the melodic phrase of the folk song *Kpukpumk'ogene* through the use of repetition and fragmentation.



Figure 1. *Thematic Development*

Reharmonization

Reharmonization is the process of giving new harmonic support to a given melody. Reharmonization is usually applied to enrich the sonic space of a particular song and, in this case, Igbo folk music, which is in most cases originally monophonic or performed in unison.



In Igbo choral writing, the composer has to take great care not to introduce new harmonies that distort the natural character of the melody or the language. It is advised that excessive chromaticism should be avoided as much as possible. Instead, diatonic harmony, call-and-response harmony, and pedal-based notes would be more appropriate. Elueme and Jayeola (2023) opined that Nigerian art music can lose its indigenous identity if the materials are treated merely as decorative resources. This implies that reharmonization should not be approached merely to add colour to the music but should be applied in such a way that it does not rob the music of its cultural identity.

In the excerpt below (Figure 2), the researcher applied reharmonization, providing new harmony to the folk song, which is originally monophonic and usually performed in unison

Full Score

KpuKpuMkp'Ogene

(An Igbo Folk Song)

Kennethmary
Kosi Umeano

Allegro ♩ = 104

SOPRANO
Kpu kpu mkp'o ge ne o ge ne o ge ne ge O nye n'e kpu'o ge ne O

ALTO
Kpu kpu mkp'o ge ne o ge ne o ge ne ge O nye n'e kpu'o ge ne O

TENOR
Kpu kpu mkp'o ge ne o ge ne o ge ne ge O nye n'e kpu'o ge ne O

BASS
Kpu kpu mkp'o ge ne o ge ne o ge ne ge O nye n'e kpu'o ge ne O

Figure 2. *Reharmonization*

Counterpoint and Voice Layering

Counterpoint is the art of combining two or more independent melodic lines in one coherent musical structure. Counterpoint can play a great role in recasting Igbo folk music for the concert hall, especially when arranging for choral or orchestral performance.



For instance, one of the voices can sing the original melody, while another voice imitates a fragment of it, and the third voice provides a form of rhythmic response. As a matter of fact, this technique fits well with African music, since it already contains elements of layered activity.

As much as counterpoint has its own rules, its application in the recasting of Igbo folk music should be done in such a way as to suit the indigenous rhythmic and melodic idea.

The researcher applied counterpoint and layering as can be observed in the excerpt below (Figure 3), applying different voice entries in the first, second, and third voices, while the lowest voice provides a unifying rhythmic effect to the music.



Figure 3. *Applying different voice entries*

SATB Choral Arrangement

One of the most practical ways of recasting Igbo folk music is through SATB choral arrangement, as it allows the folk tunes to be distributed among different categories of the human voice, including soprano, alto, tenor, and bass, making it suitable for various trained choirs in Nigeria and beyond.

The researcher carefully arranged the folk song in four parts, as can be observed in the excerpts above.



Arranging folk songs in SATB format will not only provide harmonic depth, but will encourage more participation, as more people will, in one way or the other, identify their voice category and so will be able to participate, maintaining that communal energy even in the concert hall, as it were, in the village square.

Nigerian Art Composers and Indigenous Materials

Over the years, Nigerian art music has developed as a result of the creative effort of composers who engage in formal compositional techniques as they draw from indigenous traditions. Their works are testaments that African musical materials can be used to create more complex works without losing their cultural identity. Their works go a long way in challenging the assumption that concert music must be defined only through European models. Examples of such composers include Christian Onyeji, Lazarus Ekwueme, Dan C.C Agu, Joshua Usoigwe, Alvan-Ikoku Nwamara, amongst others.

Onyeji (2019) argues that when a composer understands the internal logic of indigenous African music, he or she can generate art music that is culturally grounded. In the same vein, Elueme and Jayeola (2023) maintained that Nigerian art music should reflect the lived musical experiences of the people and not just copy Western forms with no cultural grounding.

These perspectives highlight the fact that African music can be recast into conventional art music forms without losing its identity. But to achieve this, the composer must have a good knowledge and understanding of the culture surrounding the folk songs.

Text-tone alignment, call-and-response adaptation, rhythmic layering, and modal thinking also showcase their usefulness in the practices of Nigerian art composers. Speech rhythm and tonal shape of the Igbo language are very important aspects of vocal arrangements that composers need to pay attention to in order to ensure that the words remain intelligible while providing musical interest.

Deductively, recasting Igbo folk songs is not merely a technical exercise, but an act of cultural negotiation where the composer stands between inherited communal traditions and modern art music practices to create a bridge for interaction and not replacement.

Recasting as Cultural Preservation and Artistic Renewal

Recasting Igbo folk music for concert performance is a way of preserving the culture, as it encourages preservation. When a folk melody is arranged and notated, the teaching and learning process becomes easier, and archiving is also made possible. It also opens up the opportunity for the song to leave its local setting and go as far as international performance.

Recasting also allows younger composers and performers to engage folk songs creatively, treating them as living resources for composition instead of seeing them as something old or irrelevant.



Adesoji (2023) observes that music can transmit cultural values and even promote Nigerian identity, while Ezugwu (2024) adds that cultural transformation in musical art education can make cultural activity more accessible, diversified, and relevant to contemporary learning.

Bringing Igbo folk music to the concert hall is also symbolic. Over the years, the concert hall has often been associated with Western classical prestige. If, or when, Igbo folk music enters the stage with dignity and originality, it challenges the existing narrow ideas about what counts as serious music. It will also show that African musical systems possess their own structural richness and expressive power (Agawu, 2023).

Nevertheless, great care must be taken lest the art of recasting become cultural dilution. The composer must avoid removing the music completely from its context, language, and communal spirit. The source should be acknowledged where possible, and artistic freedom should be balanced with cultural responsibility.

Conclusion

Igbo folk music is a rich cultural resource that preserves value, language, identity, and communal experience. However, because it depends on oral tradition for its preservation and transmission, as well as traditional performance context, it faces increasing challenges in contemporary society. The movement from the village square to the concert hall offers one creative response to this challenge.

Conventional art music techniques such as thematic development, reharmonization, counterpoint, motivic transformation, and SATB choral arrangement have been shown as resources and techniques for recasting Igbo folk music. These techniques, in the hands of a culturally grounded composer, do not destroy the cultural identity of these folk songs. Rather, they extend their life, broaden their audience, and create new artistic possibilities.

The unique features of Igbo folk music, such as call-and-response, rhythmic complexity, tonal language, among others, provide a strong foundation for contemporary composition and enrich African art music, as well as contribute to global musical scholarship.

Finally, recasting Igbo folk music is both an artistic and cultural project. It preserves the past while creating space for the future, in that the village square is allowed to speak within the concert hall as it reminds us that tradition is not static.



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