

**STYLISTIC TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY IGBO CHORAL ART MUSIC COMPOSITION (1965-2025)**

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**Abstract**

The contemporary Igbo choral art music tradition emerged in the 1960s, following the establishment of formal music education in Nigeria, particularly at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. These developments enabled a new generation of composers to synthesize indigenous Igbo musical idioms with Western compositional techniques. Despite a growing body of scholarship on Igbo art music, there remains limited systematic analysis of its stylistic evolution in the contemporary era. This study examines major stylistic trends in Igbo choral art music from 1965 to 2025, with particular attention to the roles of technological advancement, intercultural interaction, and societal change. Adopting a historical research design, data were collected through score analysis, participant observation, and oral interviews with selected composers and performers. The study identifies four overlapping stylistic phases characterized by shifts in text treatment, harmonic language, formal design, and performance practice. Findings reveal that, while structural features such as tonal sensitivity, polyrhythm, and text–music alignment remain foundational, composers continually adapt their styles in response to changing aesthetic preferences and technological possibilities. The study concludes that contemporary Igbo choral art music reflects a dynamic process of cultural negotiation, innovation, and continuity.

**Keywords:** Igbo choral music, art music, stylistic trends, African music, music technology, globalization

**Introduction**

Change is an inherent characteristic of human society and its cultural expressions, including music. Historically, musical traditions have evolved in response to both internal dynamics and external influences. One of the most significant drivers of such change in contemporary times is globalization, which has intensified interactions among diverse cultures. Globalization, understood as the increasing interconnectedness of societies through advancements in technology, communication, transportation, and socio-economic cooperation (Idolor, 2009), has facilitated the exchange of ideas, values, and artistic practices across geographical boundaries.

In earlier times, natural barriers such as mountains and rivers, as well as cultural differences in language and religion, limited interaction among societies. However, rapid developments in science and technology have significantly enhanced global connectivity. Innovations in transportation and communication such as print media, audio recording, satellite broadcasting, and the internet have created extensive networks through which people and cultures interact. These developments have contributed to the erosion of geographical isolation and the emergence of what is often described as a ‘global village’ (Pen, 1992; Okafor & Umezina, 2016).

A major outcome of this increased cultural interaction is the exchange and adaptation of cultural materials among diverse societies. This process often results in hybridity, wherein elements from different cultural traditions are blended to form new artistic expressions. In music, such hybridity may manifest as either subtle modifications of existing traditions or more radical departures from established practices. In both cases, these changes reflect creative efforts to achieve innovation, relevance, and aesthetic satisfaction.

Igbo choral art music exemplifies such hybridization, combining indigenous Igbo musical elements with Western compositional techniques. According to Agu (2002, 2012), experimental efforts in this genre began as early as the 1930s. Since its emergence, Igbo choral art music has undergone significant stylistic and developmental transformations. Scholars have generally identified two major historical phases in its evolution: the early period (1930–1960) and the contemporary period (1960 to the present). The transition to the contemporary period was largely influenced by the establishment of formal music education in Nigeria, particularly at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and other tertiary institutions offering music programmes (Okafor, 1976, 2015, 2017; Agu, 2002, 2012; Ekwueme, 2004; Nwamara, 2009; Onyeji, 2011). These institutions provided opportunities for systematic

training, thereby enabling a new generation of composers to engage with both indigenous and Western musical idioms in more sophisticated ways.

Over time, Igbo society itself has experienced significant transformations in modes of knowledge transmission, evolving from predominantly oral traditions to written documentation and, more recently, to digital and electronic forms. These societal and technological changes have, in turn, influenced musical practices and creative approaches. Consequently, various stylistic trends have emerged in the composition of contemporary Igbo choral art music since the 1960s, reflecting ongoing responses to changing cultural, technological, and social environments.

The objectives of this study are:

- identify various stylistic trends from 1970-2020;
- examine the impact of technological advancements;
- investigate interaction with other genres of music;
- identify some notable composers and their contributions; and
- assess societal influences on these stylistic developments.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is hinged on 'Evolutionary Theory of Change in Arts' by Heinrich Wölfflin. It was derived from the theory of evolution by Charles Darwin. It refers to the idea that art movements and styles evolve over time through a process of natural selection, genetic drift, and other mechanisms analogous to those in biological evolution. Wölfflin proposed that artistic styles evolve in a linear progression, with each style building upon the previous one, much like how species evolve in biology. Some important aspects of the evolutionary theory of change in art include:

- **Gradualism:** Artistic changes occur gradually, over a long period.
- **Variation:** Artists experiment with new styles and techniques, creating variations within a style.
- **Selection:** The art market, critics, and collectors select which styles are successful, influencing the direction of future art.
- **Heritage:** Each art movement inherits characteristics from the previous one, creating a continuity of styles.

Pertinently, the changes in style in art could be to counter boredom as well as increase the relevance of a work of art to its consumers. In support of this view, Martindale and Uemura (1983) explains thus:

Aesthetic preference is hypothetically based upon the arousal potential of a work of art, with maximum preference being found for works with medium arousal potential. Arousal potential is determined by the psychophysical (e.g. intensity, pitch), ecological (i.e. meaningfulness) and collative (e.g. complexity, dissonance, novelty) aspects of a stimulus. With repeated presentations, a work of art loses its arousal potential because of habituation or boredom. (p. 225)

Applied to music, these principles explain how music composers gradually introduce innovations (variation), respond to audience preferences and institutional contexts (selection), and retain core stylistic features over time (heritage). In the context of Igbo choral art music, stylistic changes can be understood as responses to shifting socio-cultural realities and technological developments. Composers continuously adapt their works to maintain relevance and aesthetic appeal, while preserving essential elements such as tonal sensitivity and rhythmic complexity.

### **Contemporary Igbo Choral Art Music**

Ekwueme (2008) describes art music as "music of serious intent, composed and performed in the idiom of European classical music by formally trained musicians in conservatories, music institutions and universities, as opposed to folk and popular music" (p. 118). Onyeji (2015) further explains that art music is distinguished into the secular and the sacred types, the vocal (solo or choral) and instrumental forms as well as the operatic and theatrical forms. While composers of indigenous music are not recognized and do not appropriate their works, art music insists on individual ownership of composed music and proper recognition of the composers.

The Igbo choral art music refers to choral music compositions by Igbo art music composers. It came under experimentation from the 1930's, and has over time, developed to a high level of sophistication (Agu, 2002, 2012). Igbo choral art music emerged as a result of the need for indigenized music for Christian worship to complement the hymns and chants of the European missionaries. The hymns and chants, which were translated to Igbo and accompanied with the reed organ were presented to the early converts as the only music accepted to God. These were foreign to Igbo culture and could not adequately meet the indigenous musical taste of the converts (Agu, 2012). Okafor (2024) explains that the hymns and chants hindered the eurhythmic body movements that usually occur either as reflex or intentional response to Igbo songs. Also, the strophic structure of the hymns most times defies the speech rhythm as well as the tonal inflexions of the Igbo texts (Okafor, 2015, 2017; Okafor, 2020, 2024).

Agu (2022) corroborates thus, “The hymn tunes offered them (the early converts) no opportunity for polyrhythmic improvisation. Repetition, which constitutes a stimulatory factor in Igbo choral music practices was also lacking in the hymns” (p. 32).

Agu (2002) identifies two periods in the development of Igbo choral Art music, namely: the Early Stage (1930-1960) and the Period of Realization (1960-2002). The composers of the early stage, according to Okafor (1976), had no formal music training. The musical knowledge they had was what they learnt from schools and Teacher Training Colleges, with their success depending to a very large extent on their interest in music. The structure of their compositions inhibited the adherence of their melody notes to the tonal inflexions and speech-rhythms of the Igbo texts as well as altered the mood of the texts in some cases. Also, the hymns and chants they were exposed to limited their ability to develop their compositions to appreciable length. (Agu, 2002)

Pertinently, Contemporary choral art music as used in this work refers to choral works of formally trained Igbo composers from the mid-1960s to the present because the first set of music graduates of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka were produced in 1965. The composers of contemporary Igbo choral art music include Sam Ojukwu, Joshua Uzoigwe, Okechukwu Ndubuisi, Nwokolobia Agu, Dan Agu, Humphrey Nwafor, Ugochukwu Onwuka, Christian Onyeji, Joe Onyekwelu, Alvan-Ikoku Nwamara, Agatha Onwuekwe, Cordis-Mariae Achikeh, Chuma Chukwuka, Jude Nnam, Chukwudi Ezeokoli, Basil Okeke, Tony Umeh, Ben Agbo, Louis Ekezie, Jude Nwankwo, Chidi Obijiaku, Raphael Umeugochukwu and numerous others.

### Structural and Technical Qualities of Contemporary Igbo Choral Art Music

**Melody-Texts Relationship:** With their exposure to Western and African music concepts in the university/tertiary institutions, the composers of contemporary Igbo choral art music took care of the flaws identified with the works of the composers of the early period, such as ensuring the adherence of the melody notes of their songs to the tonal inflexions and speech rhythm of their chosen Igbo texts.

The Igbo language has three levels of tones (high = /, low = \ and mid = -). A word could produce about two, three or four different meanings, depending on the tone levels of the syllables. The implication is that improper placement of melody notes could lead to distortion of the intended meaning of the text. The morpheme, *i-ke*, for example, could form different words due to variations in the pitch levels of the syllables.

Íké = strength/power

Íkè = bottom/buttocks or to share

Íkē = to tie

This, the early composers did not consider in their works. The musical example 1a. below is the first phrase of Ishmael Nwangene’s (one of the early composers) work, *Madu Nine Ndi Bi N’Uwa* (All People Who Dwell on Earth). The text was improperly intoned by the melody, which intonation is represented in fig. 1. Fig. 2 captures the accurate inflexions of the text. The example two shows how the composers treated the melodies of their songs to be in agreement with the text.

#### Example 1a:

Ishmael Nwangene



Fig. 1.

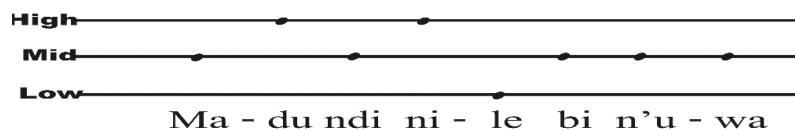
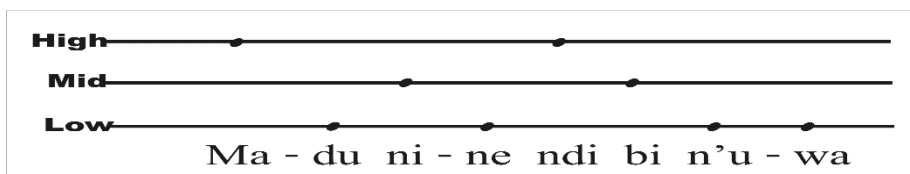


Fig 2. Accurate intonation



#### Musical example 2: First phrase of Dan Agu’s *Ka Anyi Na-Eto N’Amara* (That We May Grow in Grace)



They make use of folk music materials; derive the texts of their songs from biblical stories, Bible verses, canticles, folk music popular music, topical issues and self-generated texts. The contemporary composers have written works in different Nigerian and other African languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, Efik, Ibibio, Kalabari, pidgins and others, and also in European/American languages like English, German, Latin and so on. Their works are performed globally. (Okafor, 2023)

**Harmony, Form and Rhythm:** The contemporary Igbo choral art music composers also expanded their works to appreciable lengths (works that could last for about three to ten minutes) by making use of some of the developmental devices derived from African music. Such devices include internal variation technique, sequence and imitation, antiphony. Also, Western musical forms and techniques like binary, ternary, rondo, fugue and so on are also utilized. They use Western classical harmonic techniques and write modulatory passages. The rhythmic features of the works of the contemporary Igbo art compositions are purely African: syncopation, cross-rhythm, mixed rhythm and polyrhythm. (Okafor, 2023)

**Instruments/Accompaniment:** More so, the contemporary composers compose pieces for solo voices, duets, and trio; and introduced the use of indigenous instrumental accompaniment. They also write piano/organ lines to accompany the voice(s), and equally improved on some of the indigenous melodic instruments to enhance their performances, such as constructing xylophones or ogene phones that are tuned, based on the equal temperament system, or to a particular scale that suits their music, as well as compose lines for the melodic instruments.

**Technology:** Furthermore, it is worthy of note that the exposure to various technological tools that have emerged within the periodic space under study, such as photocopying machines in the mid-1990s and the digital tools of the 21st-century, have contributed immensely in the performance documentation and preservation, as well as dissemination of musical works, both nationally and internationally. Music notation software such as Sibelius, Finale, Noteworthy Composer and others effectively to enhance their compositions. Apart from making their works look very neat and attractive, these music notation software enable the composers to listen to their works first hand and identify flaws. The internet, social media and live-streaming platforms have enabled limitless distribution of pieces, archiving and documentation of music scores and performances, and virtual performances.

### **Stylistic Trends in Contemporary Igbo Choral Art Music**

From 1965 to 2025, the Igbo society has experienced numerous changes and developments caused by technological advancements. These have consequently contributed in shaping Igbo choral art music practices such as compositional modes and styles, transmission, dissemination, documentation and preservation. In the midst of these changes, music composers are endowed with the responsibility of composing works that would sustain the interest of their music consumers. These they achieved through compositional style variations but the structural features of their works are retained. Martindale and Uemura (1983) elucidates thus:

With repeated representation, a work of art loses its arousal potential because of habituation or boredom. Thus, successive artists are under constant pressure to increase the arousal potential of their works in order to counter the effects of habituation. This could be done by varying any of the components of arousal potential (psychophysical- intensity, pitch; ecological- meaningfulness and collative- incongruity, novelty, complexity, surprisingness). (p. 225)

Although this study tries to periodize these stylistic/compositional trends, they are still being practiced, depending on the taste of the individual composer as well as the context of the music composition, hence the use of the term, 'contemporary'. These stylistic phases identified in this study are not rigid chronological divisions but overlapping tendencies shaped by evolving socio-cultural and technological contexts.

### **Folk Influence and Narrative Orientation: 1965-1980**

The compositions of this period were greatly influenced by Igbo folk songs and minstrelsy but employed Western harmonic styles, mainly triads and their inversions. They utilized forms and developmental devices such as binary, rondo, ternary, antiphony, augmentation, diminution, internal variation techniques, sequence, imitation, repetition et cetera. The compositions were characterized by story-telling. The texts were mainly either secular or quasi-religious but morally edifying. The compositions effectively utilized figurative statements and idiomatic expressions, addressing the trending issues of the society in some cases. Writing about the new genre, Nzewi (1991) further explains that:

It incorporates textual features that derive from Igbo compositional idioms. Some composers stick to the traditional Igbo contrapuntal principle while others combine Igbo compositional idioms with Western-

classical techniques learnt at Universities and Colleges...Certain elements of Igbo vocal music are regarded as aesthetic essentials in Igbo folk society. These include structure and performance styles, verbal expression, idiomatic expressions, storytelling, effective use of figurative expressions such as similes, metaphors, etc. (p. 144)

Agu (2002, p. 87) cited the text of Sam Ojukwu's composition titled '**Ikemefuna**', written in 1967 as an example of the use of figurative expressions in Art music composition

*Ikemefuna, ofu anya nū nne ya ji akpa nganga apīarugo.*

*Ọ na-abū onye erighi ejuna o nyalū ikilike ya?*

*Ikemefuna ejego ije, ọdụ ghalū ikwe sua n'ani.*

*Onya arapū nchi ma nwata na-akpa nku n'ofia.*

*Nkita taba ọkpukpū tasja, eze egbue ewu.*

#### **Literary translation:**

Ikemefuna, the only eye that is the mother's pride is blind.

Does one wears the shells of snails eaten by another?

Unfortunate Ikemefuna, the pestle has pounded the ground instead of the mortar.

The trap set for the hare has caught the child fetching firewood in the forest.

Does the goat suffer from tooth-ache after the dog has eaten the bone?

The composers also derived the texts of their songs from biblical stories or long scriptural passages that are story-like. This, as a result, led to compositions of lengthy pieces that could last for about ten minutes. Example of such pieces include *Ginị ka mmadụ bu* (What is man?) by Humphrey Nwafor; *Ọsọ ndụ agwu ike* (fleeing for life is untiring) by Gabriel Okafor, composed in 1968 after the break out of Nigeria/Biafra civil war that lasted from 1967 to 1970; *Kilibenu Jesu* (Behold Jesus), based on the events of crucifixion to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, composed by Dan Agu in 1976.

Many of the compositions written around this period could no longer be found because they were not well documented and widely disseminated. Only few composers like Dan Agu who copied all his compositions in long note exercise books before the advent and use of computer technology to typeset music in South-eastern Nigeria did not lose any of their works. The mode of transmission was through copying on the black board or dictation, whereby the choristers copied the music in their choir note books. This limited the performance of compositional works within the areas of operation of the composers. Some composers however, cut their songs in stencil and mass produced those using cyclostyling machine. The composers who fall within this period include Sam Ojukwu and Dan Agu, Nwokobia Agu, Humphrey Nwafor.

#### **Harmonic Expansion and Media Influence: 1980-2000**

As the audience of Igbo Art songs started getting bored with performances of pieces of very long lengths and verbose texts, the composers began to adjust. By this time, the texts of songs were no longer very long. They are either gotten from Bible verses if sacred (either verbatim or paraphrased) or from a secular theme. Since the words of the texts are not too many, they keep revolving throughout the pieces for emphasis and re-emphasis. The composers now wrote more complex harmonies such as chords of the seventh, ninth, eleventh and so forth, as well as chromatics in order to capture the mood of the text. (Okafor, 2024)

Okafor (2024) informs that the emergence of analogue recording studios in the 60s and subsequent establishment of State owned radio and television stations in the 70s and 80s respectively, in the Eastern part of Nigeria, contributed immensely to the improved quality of performances of Igbo choral Art music. In the 1980s, some composers/choirs started doing audio and video recordings of Igbo Art songs, although Dan C. C. Agu had the first recording of his compositions in 1976. These recordings were stored in plates and subsequently in audio and video cassettes. Performances of Igbo art music were also aired by the television and radio stations. Agu (2002) corroborates that radio and television studios have tremendously inspired Igbo art composers to great heights and that an appreciable number of original Igbo compositions and folk arrangements have either been recorded on cassette, video tapes or on discs with numerous audience patronage. Radio and Television according to Okafor (2015) "not only provide avenues for performances but also expose the choirs to good performances by other choirs. Consequently, they induce awareness, educate and increase the knowledge of choirs on good quality choral performances" (p. 14).

The commercial use of photocopying machines which gained popularity in the early 90s enabled duplication of musical scores without any alteration. Photocopy saved composers the time and burden of dictation and cutting the stencil, and also, the limitations of the manual typewriter was overcome. Musical pieces could be disseminated widely the way the composers have written them. Nevertheless, there are composers who have written very good works but because of their poor handwriting, their works did not gain wide acceptance. (Okafor, 2024)

Furthermore, printing press played vital role in documenting and preserving Igbo choral Art music compositions and also made works of Igbo composers accessible and presentable to the wider world. Although printing press was established in the Eastern region of Nigeria in the later part of the nineteenth century, it was in the 1990s that few Igbo art composers started publishing their works in book form (Okafor, 2024). Examples of such books according to Agu (2002) include Harcourt Whyte’s anthems published in the tonic solfa notation, Laz Ekwueme’s and Dan Agu’s original compositions and arrangements published in the staff notation. Sam Ojukwu, Dan Agu, Joe Onyekwelu, Chuma Chukwuka and Basil Okeke fall within this category.

**Digital Emergence and Popular Music Integration: 2000-2010**

This period could be regarded as the golden age of digital technology in Igbo society, in that it recorded tremendous breakthrough in the technological life of the people. Virtually all the facets of the society were revolutionized including music. The digital technology broke the barrier of distance; bringing the entire world into a global village. This consequently made it possible for Igbo musical practices to be easily accessible and at the same time being influenced by global trends. The emergence of digital recording wielded great influence on the musical life of the Anambra residents. It enabled an increase in the production of pop music of different genres like contemporary gospel songs, highlife, afrobeat, afropop and so forth. The rise in the production of pop music was as a result of the societal demand for it.

The contemporary Art music composers however, began to integrate some elements of pop music in their works such as dance rhythms and pop music accompaniment styles, for societal relevance. Dan Agu’s *Chineke nye anyi udo*, composed in 2003 is a typical example of such works. Some of the bass guitar accompaniment styles that were common with pop music of the time were written for the bass part at different places in the composition. For instance, the styles in musical examples 3 and 4 are found in bars 22-29 (example 5) and bars 37-45 (example 6) respectively, although slightly varied.

**Musical example 3**



**Musical example 4**



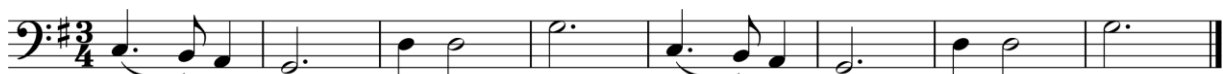
6



**Chineke Nye Anyi Udo**

Dan C. C. Agu,  
 May, 2003

22



Yu, — yu, yu, e, u - do, Yu, — yu, yu, e, u - do,

**Musical example 6**

Dan C. C. Agu,  
 May, 2003

37



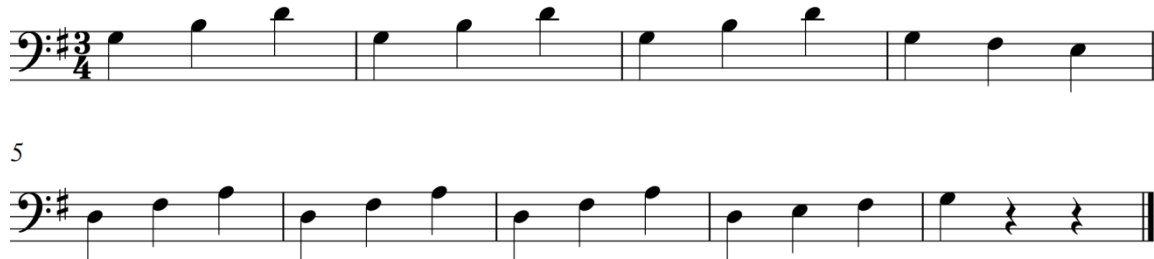
41 o, u - do, e, u - do, e, u - do, u -



o, u - do, e, u - do, e, u - do, u - o,

The musical example 7 is an arpeggio style employed in a song titled *Ebezina* by Chief Osita Osadebe, a highlife song that gained wide popularity within this period. Such style is also found in bars 84-89 of *Chineke nye anyi udo* with slight variation.

**Musical example 7**



Also, there was an awareness of different music notation software like the Finale and Sibelius by few individuals in the State. This enabled composers to have their works neatly typed in staff notation and to publish their works in book form. More so, digital recording enabled composers to document their works in sound in Compact Disks (CDs) and Video CDs and Digital Video Disks (DVD). Agu's, Jude Nnam and Nwamara's are key players in this period.

**Globalization and Digital Dissemination: 2010-2025**

This period recorded a boom in the awareness and utility of computer technology as well as various social media and lives streaming platforms such as facebook, whatsapp, telegram, YouTube, zoom, spotify et cetera. This was facilitated by the inclusion of Music Technology course, which comprises organology, digital sound recording and use of music notation software, in the curriculum of various Departments of Music of tertiary institutions in Igboland that offer music programmes, beginning with the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and later, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka in 2011.

Consequently, the advancements in the digital technology greatly influenced the generation of composers that emerged within this period. They now had the opportunity to engage in computer aided music composition, in that the music notation software helps them to playback what they have written at every stage in the course of their compositions. With their exposure to the worlds of music through social media, the composers explored various world/African soundscapes, blending such with the Igbo traditional musical idioms. They have also employed the contemporary pop music practices such as code switching as well as rearranging popular songs for SATB. Examples are *Mma mma* by Chidi Obijiaku which employed code switching and *Love Nwantinti* (an Igbo pop love song by Nelly Uchendu) arranged in fugal style by Raphael Umeugochukwu.

**Musical example 8**

**Love Nwantinti**

Igbo Love Song by Nelly Uchendu,



**Musical example 9 (Mma mma by Chidi Obijiaku )**

32 | f :s .i | ta .ta :l | s :- | m :r | d .d :- .d | d :d | d :- | l - :-

la, for Your mar-ve-lous works we say, m-ma'm-ma, i - me - la.

| r :d .r | m .m :r .d | t :- | l - :d | r :- .d | t :d | s<sub>i</sub> .s<sub>i</sub> :- .s<sub>i</sub> | s<sub>i</sub> .s<sub>i</sub> :- .s<sub>i</sub> | s<sub>i</sub> :- | l - :-

la, for Your mar-ve-lous works we say, m-ma'm-ma, i - me - la.

| l :- | f :- | r :r .m | f .s | f .m | f :- | l - :- | m .m :- .m | m :m | m :- | f - :-

la, Je - sus, for Your mar-ve-lous works m-ma'm-ma, i - me - la.

| f :- | l - :- | s<sub>i</sub> .s<sub>i</sub> :- .s<sub>i</sub> | l - :- | s<sub>i</sub> .s<sub>i</sub> :- .s<sub>i</sub> | s<sub>i</sub> .s<sub>i</sub> :- .s<sub>i</sub> | d<sub>i</sub> .d<sub>i</sub> :- .d<sub>i</sub> | d<sub>i</sub> :d<sub>i</sub> | d<sub>i</sub> :- | l - :-

la, m-ma'm - ma, m-ma'm-ma, m-ma'm-ma, m-ma'm-ma i - me - la.

More so, musical scores and performances are now distributed without limits via various social media platforms like the facebook, whatsapp, you tube and telegram. Musical performances could now be streamed live for those who are not physically present at the performance venue to view virtually, using their android phones. Zoom has also made it possible for virtual rehearsals and performances of Igbo choral Art music. The composers that fall in this category include Alvan-Ikoku Nwamara, Ben Agbo, Jude Nwankwo, Anthony Umeh, Chidi Obijiaku and Raphael Umeugochukwu.

**Conclusion**

The establishments of the Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka and other tertiary institutions that offer music programmes in the 1960s revolutionized the choral art music practices in Igbo land and gave birth to the contemporary Igbo choral art Music. The contemporary Igbo choral art music took care of the flaws identified with the early compositions. It also synergized both Western and Igbo musical idioms as a result of the exposure gained by the composers on Western music concepts and systematic study of African music. From 1965 to 2025, contemporary Igbo choral art music has evolved through continuous stylistic transformation shaped by education, technology, and globalization. Despite these changes, the genre retains its indigenous identity. Future research may explore emerging trends such as digital composition and global collaboration.

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