

## **A Study of Nigeria's Opera Development and Composers**

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### **Abstract**

One of the performing art forms that came to Nigeria during the colonial days from Europe is opera, it has subsequently developed the Nigerian form over time in different categories. With focus on the scored opera and composers, this paper employed survey and interview method to gather primary data while literature review provided secondary data to trace the development of scored operas in Nigeria and identify its composers. The paper revealed that the development of Nigeria's scored opera was a result of Western training and more importantly, the establishment of Nigerian higher institutions that fostered music study along other performing arts departments that trained professional musicians and artistes. It however

established fifteen 16 opera composers and twenty-nine (30) operas in Nigeria. It subsequently concluded that the future of opera in Nigeria is hinged on improved educational curriculum.

### **Introduction**

Opera developed in Europe 17th century and it came to Nigeria during the colonial era as part of the social activities among foreigners and Nigerians who had acquired and appreciated the Western culture especially through mission Schools and Churches. Opera became one of the performances that was brought on stage during the period as modern society emerged. However, Nigerians overtime developed a form similar to the European opera called the 'folk opera' which became formidable in the 1940s, pioneered by Hubert Ogunde with a number of other composers and dramatists who emerged and explored the art form around the middle of the 20th century. However, the early folk opera in Nigeria did not enjoy formal music notation and libretto. The early Nigerian folk opera gradually gave way to professional theatre, subsequently, new form of opera developed. Western music education with its culture and modern environment that started emerging in Nigeria's 20th century became significant influence for the new operatic form which grew and birthed new dimensions in operatic growth in Nigeria. Its development even though slow probably due to the technicality involved, has however developed at its own pace in Nigeria and has been established as part of Nigerian musical and theatrical art forms. As Nigerian operas are limited so are its composers. While the former (folk opera) had received attention in literature, the latter has a dearth of knowledge as minimal written works on it is found. This study therefore seeks to examine the evolution of scored operas with a survey of Nigerian opera composers and their works.

### **The Nigerian Opera in Pre-independence**

Evolution of Western education and the Church in Nigeria were pivotal to the development of opera in Nigeria. Music used in the Christian liturgy, classical as well as social music from foreign communities thrived within the growing Nigerian modern societies such as Lagos, Onitsha, Ibadan, Calabar among few others. Several music groups evolved and promoted different genres of music that surfaced within the society, in the Church and schools. Equally, dramatic society sprang up and brought significant influence within the society. Ogunbiyi (1989), Omolola (1995), Ekwueme (2008) and other scholars documented series of artistic events within the society.

Ogunbiyi (1981) notes that musical development in Lagos came early and

drama developed later. The influence went on for about several years sprouting artistes with improved ideas composing and performing in pre-colonial Nigeria in the 1920s and 1930s. It must be noted that traditional art forms were also a force to reckon with during these periods. Side-by-side traditional rituals and festivals among the locals took place as Western performances grew among the elites. Of important note during this period was the birth of Nigerian indigenous churches. Aladura Church, 1927, Cherubim and Seraphim, 1928 among few others. Adedeji (2004), Loko (2013), Alemede (2013) established the sprouting of these local Churches. From the musical experiences within schools, mission churches, indigenous churches as well as traditional musical as well as dramatic experiences, Nigerian folk opera was established. Vidal (1988) and Adedeji & Ekwuazi (1995) revealed the developments that led to the folk opera. 'Native air' (musical style that employed indigenous music traditional air as different from Western musical air) developed among the indigenous Churches and was employed in the liturgical music of the early indigenous Churches as well as non-liturgical music in the Churches. This became one of the footings for folk opera that later developed in the 1940s. Composers of native air and Church musicians composed and performed songs, anthems and oratorios within the Churches before the folk opera developed. Adedeji (2004) notes the oratorical performance as oppose the operatic performance in the indigenous Churches. In 1944, Hubert Ogunde infused dramatic actions and dances into the oratorical performance when called to organize music concert for one of the indigenous churches. His innovation became the evolution of folk opera. Clark (1979), Ogunbiyi (1981), Omojola (1995), Adedeji & Ekwuazi (1998) as well as Vidal (1988), (2012) are among Scholars who gave extensive account of the folk opera development in Nigeria.

### **Nigerian Opera in Post-Independence beyond 1960**

Folk opera in Nigeria became the fore runner of Nigerian professional theatre as some notable early Nigerian professional theatre artistes lunched their professional theatre practice from performances of the folk opera. Its evolution during the 1940s extended to Nigeria's post-independence. Adedeji & Ekwuazi (1998) document 25 years of operatic (folk opera) movement in Nigeria. The literature which was the result of the symposium to celebrate folk opera in Nigeria revealed historical record by the artistes who performed the arts form from the earliest stage till the time. Narratives of different efforts by composers, dramatists as well as artistes revealed processes and practices in the development of the art form. Composers, lyricists, poets, actors, dancers, instrumentalists and directors revealed their contributions at different stages of folk opera in Nigeria.

Nigerian independence in October, 1960 opened the way to the acquisition of functional education needed by the nation which was an agitation earlier to the time. Previous

education especially higher education was said not to fulfill the need of the people. This therefore, led to the establishment of Nigerian Indigenous University (University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN)) other than the University College, Ibadan that was an affiliation of the University of London. The University (UNN) became the first to establish music department in the country with the philosophy “Restoring the dignity of man”. Expatriate were employed to teach among few Africans which comprised of Ghanaians as revealed by Omojola and Mokwunyei during interview. Evolution of the University of Nigeria with the department of music became the springboard that produced music scholars in Nigeria who performed, composed and became academics. Those who were trained began to compose different genres of music which include opera, following the efforts of Nigerians who earlier received music academic and professional training abroad.

Omojola (1995), Vidal (1993), Ekwueme (2008) identify Adam Fiberesima as well Sam Akpabot in the pivotal role of writing opera in Nigeria. ‘He (Adam Fiberesima) introduced the Western operatic style as a basis for writing operatic music in contrast to the folk style of Hubert Ogunde and others’ (Vidal, 2012). This can be attributed to the Western professional and academic education they acquired outside the country. However, University of Nigeria, Nsukka developed remarkable operatic knowledge in her curriculum. Operatic performance is commonplace in the department aside the body of knowledge in opera learnt in class room. Mokwunyei disclosed in an interview, Western operatic form was a regular performance because of the influence of predominantly foreign tutors. However, with gradual arrival of Nigerians as teaching staff at the department, African oriented operas came to the fore. Operatic performance groups include Western opera and African opera at the department and this foster continuous practice, developing composers, directors as well performers of opera at the department. Individual as well as collective creative venture is fostered among tutors and students which often lead to improvisation, workshops and vigorous rehearsal to produce opera performances within and outside the institution. One of such performances was a music tour that took place in 1981 when operatic workshop and choral studies group went on tour with the opera ‘Bless the Bride’ by A. P. Herbert and Vivian Ellis (see appendix). The operatic experience at Nsukka later spread to other institutions in the country as will be seen later.

As the folk opera continued during post-independence, so academically oriented opera developed, mostly within higher institutions (universities and colleges) that foster performing arts (musical and theatrical study). Subsequently, the decline of folk opera was observed in the later works of the previous artistes who later fostered more of drama as total theatre instead of opera. The golden age of folk opera seems to decline around second decade into independence while scored opera continued to expand as performing arts

education intensified within the educational system in modern post-independence Nigerian society.

### **Opera within Nigeria's Institution.**

As noted earlier, the need for functional education that met the necessity and development of the people of Nigeria was a factor in the establishment of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1960. This brought the opportunity to study music in Nigeria as noted earlier.

Idolor (2001), Ekwueme (2008) revealed the University as the first to host music study in Nigeria. With the establishment of music as a course of study in a Nigerian University, music scholarship came alive within the nation as against moving to foreign country or informal music tutor which was the pattern before independence. Academic and professional study with greater platform for classical music performance which included opera flourished within the higher institutions.

Subsequently, additional higher institutions with the opportunity of music study sprang-up. Idolor (2001) gave the chronological establishment of music departments in Nigeria's higher institutions. Universities, Colleges of Education and Polytechnics trained and fostered formal music scholarship and practice at different levels. Operatic form was taught and performed by some of the institutions as occasions arose. While the study took place in class room and lecture theatres, performances took the turn as designed by various institutions. Public and private institutions therefore foster opera development through compositions, performance workshops, rehearsals and performances. Apart from Department of Music, University of Nigeria, Nsukka that floats Western and African opera performance workshop groups, other institutions such as University of Ilorin, operate performing arts departments with music unit of the department producing opera performance on annual basis. Composition of opera is a part of the curriculum for students who wish to specialize in composition as special area at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Delta State University, Abraka among some other. Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife and few others equally advance the development of opera in Nigeria.

Identifying some of the drive for opera compositions, it was revealed that apart from the curriculum, special occasions such as convocation performance, sessional performance, special commission among others are responsible factors that propel its composition within these institutions. Omojola in an interview pointed at some of these occasions as mobilisers in the writing of opera and this was confirmed by Amusan and Adeola (opera composers) when interviewed. In addition, lack of adequate materials for operatic study also encourage faculty members to providing operas for study and production. Furthermore, opera is studied as a form of theatre or dramatic art at these sister departments. Occasionally, performance is given to opera by some of these departments, in some instances,

music professionals work hand in glove with the theatre department to achieve standard operatic production.

### **Survey of some Nigerian opera composers and their works**

Responsibility of opera writing is enormous as it combines different areas of artistic innovations. Sometimes, collaboration of artistes may be required to create an opera, where a playwright, poet or a librettist writes the story or text of the opera, the composer sets the text or the story to music. Due to musical input, it attracts the responsibility of the composer is therefore of high demand. The composer turns the text in the narrative into sonic (musical) creative work of various melodic and harmonic interjections for vocal and instrumental interpolations. This study focuses on composers of Nigerian scored opera. The category of musicians responsible for creating these operatic works is the art musicians. This type of music is categorized as art music or serious music which may also be called classical music according to Randel (2001).

Nigerians who acquired professional music education took up the responsibility and began to turn out musical compositions using the knowledge of Western music to project African musical idioms and elements. This resulted in the category of music called 'African Art Music' or in specific 'Nigerian Art Music'. One of the major factors that distinguishes this music is the aspect of literacy. Omibiyi-Obidike (2007) in her inaugural lecture gave a general consensus about African Art music to be music 'composed by Western trained Nigerian musicians for the performance in an auditorium or hall before an audience excluded from joining in its performance'. Mokwunyei (2001) while establishing the assertion made by Omojola (1995) about Nigerian art music stressed that 'such performances took place in Churches, Universities and other educational institutions as well as public halls. The elitist culture embedded in the art music makes it significant. Several genres of African art music include; liturgical chants, vesicles, mass, anthem, cantata, opera and oratorio which are vocal music, while waltz, sonata, concerto, symphony among others are instrumental music. All these genres found their way into the Nigerian art music as generations of Nigerian music composers widen. Omibiyi-Obidike (2007) and Bello (2014) established different generations of Nigerian art music composers. Opera has enjoyed compositions from generations of Nigerian composers and have continued till contemporary time.

Opera as one of the genres has enjoyed some development in Nigeria however, it has not widely enjoyed rapid development. Abe (2001) tabulated Nigerian art music composers as revealed by Omojola (1995), among Nigerian art music composers, opera composers rank lowest as shown below.

<b>Medium of Composition (With and without Accompaniment)</b>	<b>Number of Compositions</b>	<b>Percentage (%) of Composition</b>	<b>Number of Composers</b>	<b>Percentage (%) of Composer</b>
Vocal (Solo, duet and mixed choir)	192	66%	28	52%
Keyboard (Piano & Organ)	45	15%	8	15%
Orchestra/ Chamber (West & Af. Instrument)	40	13%	11	20%
Opera	16	6%	7	13%

Table 1 showing statistics of compositions and composers in Nigeria 1995

From the table above, it becomes obvious that vocal music is highly favoured by Nigerian composers than other genres of music compared. 66% by the former against 34% representing others. 52% represents composers of vocal music which are greater in number than composers of other genres being represented by 48%. Opera compositions reflects very low percentage, as low as 6% of known opera compositions in Nigeria as at 1995 and 13% of the Nigerian art music composers were responsible for the 6%. It became evident that opera is still developing in Nigeria. 28 years from the time of the data collection, few operas are known to have been composed in Nigeria, even though operatic performances continue to take place in various departments of music and drama / theatre within Nigerian institutions of learning, most of them are not properly documented in notation and libretto.

Bello (2014) in her classification of generations of Nigerian composers, expounded the characteristic of Nigerian composers of each generation. The thirds generation explored mixed instruments in their compositions (instruments of African and Western origin) this became the hallmark of their works, subsequently the fourth generation which she regarded as contemporary composers belong to the fourth generation who intensify on the exploration of the third generation. Composers such as Adam Fiberesima, Ayo Bankole, Meki Nzewi, Laz Ekwueme, Okechukwu Ndubisi, Samuel Akpabot are composers of the third generation while Dan Agu, Sam Amusan and Bode Omojola are example of the Nigerian opera composers who belong to the fourth generation of composers. These generation of musicians laid the foundation of Nigerian opera, expanded it by training and influencing subsequent art musicians as will be seen in the chart of opera composers in Nigeria. Below is a chart of Nigerian opera composers.

<b>Composer</b>	<b>Opera</b>	<b>Year of Composition</b>
Adam Fiberesima	The Rascal	1945
	Opu jaja	1973
	Oro kuta	Unknown
Okechukwu Ndubuisi	Vengeance of the lizard	1966
	Dr. Feeles	1968
Samuel Akpabot	Jaja of Opobo	1972
Ayo Bankole	A night of miracles	1969
Laz Ekwueme	A night in Bethlehem	1962
Meki Nzewi	Adaora	1968
	Mystery of illusion	1974
	Omaledo	1985
Akin Euba	Chaka	1970
Bode Omojola	Ode of a new morning	1989
	Kings for sale	1990
	Odyssey of an innocent	1994
	Moremi	2014
	Irinajo (Odyssey of a dream)	2018



Taiye Adeola	The gods have spoken	2012
	Wanted	2019
David Bolaji	Tani mola?	2010
	Campus life (musical)	2016
Omotoso Christopher	Ife lagba	2001
	Efunsetan	2001
	Triumph of destiny	2018
Dayo Oyedun	The moon and I	1999
Debo Akinwumi	Dawn of new era	2001
	Campus life (musical)	2001
Ademola Adedoyin	Esan a ke (Karma)	2014
Ngobili Chijioko	Okonkwo	2016
Ayo Oluranti	Omo agbe	2022

Table 2 showing known Nigerian opera composers and their works

### **A look into the future of Opera in Nigeria**

Opera is a unique genre of arts because it encompasses myriads of artistic expressions which include music art (vocal and instrumental), dramatic art, dance art, speech art, poetic art, visual art within theatrical whole that augments it with light, costume, props, make up and set design. It brings various artistic units together while it showcases cultural expression of people, past or present. It is therefore an artistic form which demands great attention. Multi-talented artistic potentials abound within the nation but opportunity and means of expression need expansion. Vivid example is the writer of this paper who desired multi-dimensional

study that are integral in opera. He was however limited to the units at a time because of the available courses as designed in the Nigerian educational curriculum. He was limited to embark on the study and training by alternation of departments among the units that made up opera (music-drama-dance-theatre) at different levels of education in order to achieve his desire. Even though, all along opera was taught in the class room at the different levels of study, it was not intensive because it was not the main course of study at each of the levels of education. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a department or a unit for opera development, greater attention should be given to opera in the curriculum, both in the written curriculum as well as the unwritten curriculum in the Nigerian music, drama or theatre arts departments. This will secure a lofty future for opera in Nigeria.

African form of performance which expresses combination of the various performing arts as a single whole call for development in modern Nigerian society. This should be considered alongside the Western orientation of units of art - music, dance and drama which is largely the present situation in Nigeria. Nzewi (2003) affirmed that African performance – music, dance, poetic and dramatic arts among others are not separated but a unified whole which are centered around music, therefore he propounded the word ‘musical arts’ to represent the African form of performance. However, in a reaction to Nzewi’s proposition, Adedeji (2016) opined that the upholding of the unitary study (of music, drama and others) in Nigeria as obtained in the current curriculum for a number of reasons. Whether it is called musical arts, or dramatic arts or creative arts, necessity of multi-artistic or multi-disciplinary approach and expression in performance in good measure cannot be limited in artistic expression both in study and practice where necessary. However, the study of Africa’s natural development of performance should not be given away because that is an established form of development in Africa from time immemorial that give Africa her essence and unique identity.

As noted earlier, the elitist affiliation of opera especially the scored opera has made it more appreciated by the upper class. There is need therefore, for opera to be made appreciable by the lower class. This may however foster the development of other forms of music-theatre. Such is the position for the resuscitation of the folk opera in modern Nigeria as proposed by Abe, Olusakin and Adeolu-Abe (2019). In the effort to revive it, proper notation and documentation will be put in place for the preservation and reenactment for future conservation of the African heritage. Another form of music-theatre similar to opera is ‘the musical’ which has also surfaced in Nigeria performing arts scenes. There is need for the development of this art form in Nigeria. It is an art form that has gained recognition with wide range of acceptance within the global space, and it is attaining greater recognition in Nigeria with a few musicals being performed. The ‘musical’ employs popular styles and songs in its composition and performance as against the Western classical forms in opera.

The future of opera or music-theatre holds brighter promises in Nigeria if concerted effort is made to advance the level of opera education in the institutions, from primary to tertiary institution. Pupils exposed to operatic performances from early stage tend to build inherent talents, confidence and better social relationship with people than those who do not have such experience. Similarly, opera or music-theatre can be used as social engagement for the development of individuals within a community, community development, social empowerment, social engineering and economic benefit. Employing opera in any of these ways promises greater future for opera in Nigeria. In addition, opera can help a people tell their story or history using forces of entertainment obtainable within the opera. However, better future will be achieved when this improved and focused effort is made in operatic education and empowerment.

### **Conclusion**

The development of Nigerian opera reflects dynamics of advancement within the Nigerian society. Starting with the folk opera which is unscored to the scored opera which may be referred to as art opera. Professional training in Western education is pivotal to the realization of the scored opera as Nigerian schooled and trained musicians began to experiment in writing using Western compositional techniques with African idioms and elements to create the Nigerian opera. Employing African realities in socio-cultural, socio-political as well as socio-economical elements within the musical and theatrical medium in the creative works, is key to sustaining the African development and essence. This has birthed sets of artistic intelligent opera composers who have contributed to global body of knowledge and artistic works. A sum of fifteen (16) known opera composers with twenty-nine (30) operatic works represent Nigerian opera in this study. It must be noted that as performing arts (music, drama and dance) study expand, there would be evolving composers whose works are yet to be recognized considering Nigeria's vast geographical area. For continuous and rapid development of Nigerian opera, it is important to expand the scope of opera in the Nigerian educational curriculum and in the society at large because the socio-cultural, health, educational and economic benefits obtainable in opera as this will go a long way to foster development of the nation at large.

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