

# The Concept of African Pianism

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## Abstract

*African Pianism is a style of piano music which employs techniques and styles used in the performance of African instrumental traditional songs and African popular music. The percussive and melodic capabilities of the piano make it an ideal medium for expressing the rhythmic and percussive features of African music. Deploying African traditional idioms in compositions using the concept of African pianism is however only one aspect of creating an art based on the fundamental principles which are essential to its well being. The paper discusses the various techniques and styles composers employ in composing music using the concept of African Pianism.*

## Definition and Scope

African Pianism describes the approach of composition that combines African elements and western elements for the piano. A composition can therefore be based on African traditional vocal music or instrumental music. The concept also deals with the keyboard music of African art composers. Works by art music composers who are not Africans, but who have learnt to use idioms in African music can be included in African Pianism. The need to write African music for the piano arises in view of evidence that the piano is a more developed musical instrument and offers greater opportunity to the composer than was realised. The percussive and melodic capabilities of the piano make it a most ideal medium for expressing the rhythmic and percussive features of African music.

Akin Euba, who coined this concept African Pianism in an article entitled “Traditional Elements as the basis of New African Art Music”, writes:

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For those composers interested in cross-cultural musical synthesis, this writer sees a possibility of evolution in the use of western pianoforte in combination with African drums and other instruments of percussion. The piano already displays certain affinities with African music and by creating a type of African pianism to blend with African instruments; it should be possible to achieve a successful fusion.

In his introduction to the proceedings of an international symposium and festival held at the University of Pittsburgh in October 1999, on the theme, “Towards an African Pianism” Euba tries to propose a definition, scope and methodology for African Pianism. Tracing the history of the use of Western keyboard instruments in Africa to date, he says:

Western keyboard instruments were introduced to Africa by Christian missionaries (dating from the mid-nineteenth century in West Africa) and therefore disseminate through trade and other agents of culture contact ... Today, they are among the most common western instruments in Africa and (in their electronic forms) have been widely adopted by pop musicians (5).

Euba (1989:151) further states that techniques used in the performance of African instrumental music in general would form a good basis for an African pianistic style. The ingredients of an African pianism include (a) thematic repetition, (b) direct borrowings of thematic material (rhythm and tonal) from African traditional sources, and (c) percussive treatment of the piano. He later added another feature, which is making the piano behave like an African instrument. Nketia, one of the African composers who endorsed the concept of African Pianism, provides further insight into the theory of this concept. In the preface (piii) of his *African Pianism: Twelve Pedagogical Pieces*, Nketia writes:

African pianism refers to a style of piano music which derives its characteristic idiom from the procedures of African percussion music as exemplified in bell patterns, drumming, xylophones and mbira music. It may use

simple or extended rhythmic motifs or the lyricism of traditional songs and even those of African popular music as the basis of its rhythmic phrases. It is open ended as far as the use of the tonal materials is concerned, except that it may draw on the modal and cadential characteristic of traditional music. Its harmonic idiom may be tonal, atonal, consonant or dissonant in whole or in part, depending on the preferences of the composer, the mood or impressions he wishes to create to heighten or soften the jaggedness of successive percussive attacks. In this respect, the African composer does not have to tie himself down to any particular school of writing, if his primary aim is to explore the potential of African and tonal usages.

From Euba's and Nketia's observations on the definition and scope of African Pianism, we understand that compositions in African pianism can employ techniques and styles used in the performance of African instruments like the xylophone, thumb piano and drum music. The idea is to let the piano act like an African instrument. There can also be the use of traditional songs or African popular music, arranged to suit the capabilities of the piano. The harmonic idiom may be tonal or atonal. The process of appropriation of local material may range from as little as a germ of ideas to a whole section of the local material.

In his article, "Is African Pianism possible?" (1999), Kofi Agawu examines the concept from various angles. He argues that for musicians from Africa to compose for the piano, they need to study very well rhythm in African music. He suggests four pieces of music by Nketia ("The Volta Fantasy"), Bankole ("Oiyaka Konga"), Euba ("Scenes from Traditional Life") and Joshua Uzoigwe ("Igbo Folk Songs Arranged for Piano") as models to be studied. He finally acknowledges that if one were to accept the notion that there could exist a body of music called "African Piano Music", then perhaps African Pianism was not an impossible concept.

## Composers

Some of the composers whose works exemplify the concept of African Pianism include Akin Euba, Ayo Bankole and Joshua Uzoigwe from Nigeria; J. H. Nketia, Kenn Kafui and Gyimah Labi from Ghana; Gamal Abdel-Rahim from Egypt; and Victor Kasawu and Edward Ninna from South Africa. Examples of some of the works in African Pianism are: “The Volta Fantasy” by J.H. Nketia, “The Pentanata” by Kenn Kafui, “The Dialects” by Gyimah Labi, and “The African Scene” by Edward Ninna.

An examination of some of the works of these composers reveals deep and meaningful attempts to change African traditional music structure. They demonstrate the ways in which modern composers are trying to make the old traditions relevant today, and to bring traditional African music up to date with the society. It must be noted that composers have their preferred styles and traits in the selection of African traditional material for the piano. With regard to the musical elements (harmony, melody, form, texture and rhythm), composers also have their individual ways of dealing with the musical elements. In most of the compositions one finds that the harmonic vocabulary is based on Western and African harmonic principles. Among the African harmonic principles are:

1. homophonic parallelism in seconds, thirds, fourths, fifths and Polarity
2. polyphony of a contrapuntal nature
3. Ostinato accompaniment to a melody
4. notes occurring together at overlapping of call and response phrases
5. melodic decoration with sporadic division during unison passages

Among the western harmonic principles are:-

1. chromaticism
2. primary and secondary chords, used sometimes with their sevenths
3. twentieth century tonal vocabulary in the form of:

- a. tone clusters, which add some color to the harmony
- b. chords built on super imposed thirds
- c. parallelism in 2<sup>nds</sup> , 3<sup>rds</sup> , 4<sup>ths</sup> , 5<sup>ths</sup> , and 6<sup>ths</sup>
- d. non harmonic materials such as passing tones, suspensions, changing notes, pedal points and unprepared suspensions with delayed resolutions.
- e. polychords
- f. atonality

Notable rhythms are:

1. the cross rhythm used especially in African percussion music
2. hemiola
3. shifted accents and rapid meter changes
4. asymmetric divisions and meters
5. principle of repetition and variation or improvisation which helps in achieving rhythmic variety
6. isorhythms
7. polyrhythms
8. non-accentual rhythms
9. additive rhythms
10. traditional rhythmic patterns

With regard to texture, most compositions reveal the alternation of different textures. Horizontal and vertical occurrence of motifs is a common trait of some composers, as is variation of the density of texture by cutting down the number of voices at certain points. In addition, dissonant textures under an almost continuous string of changing melodies, homophonic parallelism, teaming up two parts and assigning them a thematic material against those of another team, the fragmentation of motifs, transfer of theme to a different register of the piano, the expansion and compression

of melodic and harmonic intervals, and the change of chords over a fixed textural phrase, are all kinds of textures composers employ.

Both Western and African forms are employed by composers. The form of an African song is derived partly from the contexts in which it is used and partly from the form of the verbal texts on which the melody is based. There is always room for extemporization and for rearrangement of the order of verses. The actual shape of a song therefore grows out of the situation in which it is sung. Some composers pay attention to the basic forms like the call and response, basic melodic patterns and phrase lengths, resultant forms and patterns as used in African music.

Composers try to do more than state the problems in using African elements. They try to fuse traditional African musical elements in such a way that closely reflects the value system of the culture. In a continent like Africa, which is experiencing fundamental alterations of its basic structure, the role of the creative artist is not only very important but also one that requires much research into African music. Certain aspects of some of the compositions in African pianism indicate transition and change of a major order; not a slow natural evolution, but a deliberate quick turn toward a particular direction (African pianism). Composers make a good attempt to expand the expressive possibilities of the piano. At the same time, the compositions place greater emphasis on the composer as a unique personality, as an individual with a personal statement to make.

### **The Piano Style**

The piano offers a great opportunity to the composer that seeks boundlessness. The piano, we should note, has its own style, and therefore any composer writing for it, whether in the African or western idiom, should know its style. It is not just a matter of transferring African music to the piano; the composition should be pianistic. The following are some of the styles used:

1. scalic passages, in ascending or descending order
2. appoggios and broken chords

3. octaves
4. chromaticism
5. compound intervals and skips
6. concord and dissonant harmonies involving five or more notes

### **Problems**

When the composer adopts a syncretic approach in his compositions as regards idiom, some of the problems that arise include:

- 1) the conflict of theories, that is, theories of consecutive octaves and fifths under Western conventional rules as against the principles of homophonic parallelism.
- 2) the presence of modulation in Western music and its absence in traditional African music. The imperfect cadence progressing from a second inversion of the tonic chord to the dominant has been changed to the dominant seventh due to the constraints of text.
- 3). the need for a composer using the syncretic approach in his compositions to master the fundamentals of African melody, harmony and rhythm so that he can create typical African tunes based on any of the varieties of heptatonic, hexatonic and pentatonic scales used in African societies. When he is able to do this, he needs not always borrow tunes from the traditional repertoire, for he can create tunes that would be true to the traditional idiom.
- 4) the question of how to make Western harmony less obtrusive in new African music that adopts the syncretic approach, that is, balancing or bringing out the African elements more than the Western elements in composition
- 5). perceptions of the syncretic approach by consumers or audiences. Because the African grows up with a musical language of his home culture, the typical African music lover is often unaware that there are other languages of music. If, therefore, a piece of music in a foreign idiom does not appeal to him instantly, he assumes it is because the music is not good. He does not consider the possibility

that he might have failed to understand the music, since he assumes music to be a universal language.

- 6). challenges to performers: the syncretic nature of compositions in African pianism poses challenges not only to composers who make meaningful creative use of African traditions and developments in form and harmony, but also to performers who need to expand their orientation and interpretative skills, particularly where such music embodies concepts and expectancies to which they are not accustomed because their performance background is in Western music. A vibrant musical life can only be sustained if there is a good pool of competent performers who interpret the works of composers to an appreciative audience. For performers who are interested in works in African pianism, there is the need for them to familiarize themselves with melody, harmony, rhythm, texture and form in African music in order to interpret such pieces properly.
- 7) the problems that mastering the style of the piano sometimes creates for the composer.
- 8) the issue of aesthetics: while aesthetics is quite difficult to handle within one's own culture, cross culturally it becomes impossible, as too many factors exist that are largely inaccessible to the outsider. Nonetheless, the aesthetic criterion is the one which I find to be at least partially valid. In this respect several points need to be stressed. First, one does not expect a stylistic innovator to be the same person who perfects that style, particularly when the composer is moving from a long established and sophisticated oral tradition into a fledgling written tradition. Second, modern composers are trying to reach an all-African audience who do not share the feeling for and knowledge of the cumulative meanings of traditional African music. Finally, an aesthetic criterion that subsumes all other criteria is itself an innovation and is to some extent Western.

In a traditional society in which music is closely linked to religion and ritual, beauty is always subordinate to efficacy, and meaningfulness, relevance and simple usefulness are infinitely more important than the creation of sensually delightful sound patterns. In the best of all possible music systems, meaning and beauty coincide. A form of music universal to all Africa would probably be used more for contemplation than to

serve as accompaniment for social events. There is already a clear need among Africans for a new form of music which would serve a function roughly identical to that for which Westerners use their art music. African musicians who have been exposed to Western music have attempted to supply from this need by devising compositions which are essentially based on Western idioms. These composers sometimes employ a few elements of African music in their works in the hope of creating a new idiom of African music. When such composers write a symphony, for example, they use African folk tunes for their thematic material in the belief that this is sufficient to produce an African symphony. Yet not only do the folk tunes sound more European than African, but also the rest of the work is usually conceived, instrumentally and stylistically, in accordance with principles of European symphonic practice, and the resultant composition must be regarded merely as a variant of the Western musical idiom.

It is possible to create a kind of African symphony in which the notion of symphony is constructed to mean no more than an intellectual work of great depth and dimension. In order for such a work to be truly African, it must use the stylistic and instrumental materials of African music. African musicians who are seeking to create a new idiom of African music which is designed primarily for aesthetic listening, and who see the means to this end in some kind of fusion of African and Western styles, have apparently decided that African traditional music is so limited in scope that it cannot furnish the elements necessary for the creation of the new idiom. On the contrary, my own exposure to western and other foreign idioms of music has made me realize that there are abundant possibilities in the traditional music of Africa to develop a new African art music which makes little or no reference to foreign idioms.

The basic elements for this kind of music certainly exist in African traditional music even though African musicians, in their preoccupation with the use of music as a part of social functions, have not exploited them for this purpose. Within the limits of tribal music alone it is possible to devise new sound combinations with sufficient variety for extended listening. But by drawing upon the totality of African musical idioms, the modern African composer will not only broaden the scope of his music, but will also be able to create a language of music which can be

understood by all Africans.

African composers in the Western idiom often lament the lack of performers to interpret their works and the absence of an audience to appreciate them on the continent. They are therefore forced to go to Europe to seek both. These composers, it would appear, have not made much impact in Europe either, partly because they are too few and partly because their works are often written in a style which is no longer fashionable in Europe. Thus, these artists must be regarded, at least for the time being, as constituting a marginal group whose work may never really take hold in Africa, and as artists who may never command much influence in Europe until their music is able to compete successfully with what is being produced by contemporary European composers. But by working towards the development of a style of African music which can serve as a common musical language for the whole of the African continent, African composers will have a wide audience for the performance of their music. Africans should not be discouraged from acquiring foreign musical idioms either, since it is an advantage to be able to communicate with non-African audiences.

African traditional music lays emphasis on repetition, but practitioners of new art should be less concerned with repetition and more with variation. In other words, they should aim at creating a musical idiom which would be suitable for contemplation. The new music should be a re-combination of the elements of traditional music and should be a realization of the stylistic potentialities of those elements. Crafting compositions using African materials entails mastery of the elements that constitute the hallmark of African music as well as the principles of composition. To prepare a student for such an undertaking, there must be a worked out curriculum that progressively leads to the mastery of both Western and African instruments. The objective of such a program would be to produce excellent practical musicians who would be bi-culturally literate. A comprehensive program in African music should address morphological as well as practical concerns. It should also aim at exposing the student to a wide body of African music which must be introduced at appropriate points in the curriculum.

The process of idiomatic writing entails the rewriting of one's African musical thought process in an appropriate manner for conventional Western instruments like the piano. The budding composer has to acquaint himself with structures in African music. Matters such as meter, tempo, time line, rhythmic, harmonic and melodic characteristics, as well as instrumental organization become important in identifying African musical types.

The issue of form would also have to be addressed. Doing so entails acknowledging the basic notion that a piece is structured with elements that function like a living organism. This is not to say that folk music lacks this quality. To obtain a meaningful formal structure, one must have a coherent syntax. Idea must be found, presented and worked out upon relationship. The relative importance and function of the elements would determine the nature of the construction. An appropriate subject must be found, one that would enable the vision of an entire composition. To aid this process, the student should be exposed to as large a body of folk material as possible. Through a sifting process, the appropriate subject may be obtained. After obtaining the characteristic features of the musical types, the composer would have had to study analytically, the greater body of mater pieces in the greater music literature.

The future African composer may consider techniques such as the hocket, stratification and improvisation, among others, for organizing his work on African lines. There are also a host of rich timbral resources as well as the structural aspects of the diversified musical genres of our continent which may be judiciously used. The various ways of handling form, harmonic and rhythmic structures, generation of motion, tensions and resolutions, coherence of syntax etc, would be quickly understood through the study of various masterpieces. However, the composer must understand that it is in the adaptation and expression of the universal compositional principles in African terms that the challenge lies.

From the African perspective, the interrelationship between melody, harmony, polyphony, the time line and other instrumental supporting units must be clearly understood. The law of comprehension should reign supreme. Coherence and authenticity should also be the decisive factors

in creativity. Every composer cannot expect to have a universal message, but he may reasonably expect to have a special message for his own people. Many young composers however make the mistake of imagining that they can be universal without at first being local. Is it not reasonable to suppose that those who share our life, our history, our customs, our climate, even our food, should have some secret to impart to us which the foreign composer, though he may be perhaps more imaginative, more powerful, more technically equipped, is not able to give us? This is the secret of the African composer.

The young composer must not shut himself up and think about art; he must live with his fellow artists and make his art an expression of the whole life of the community. Young composers should learn how to use traditional idioms in their compositions. Most of the best compositions in modern music come from composers who have kept close to their several native traditions and whose individual genius has enabled them to extend their music in directions undreamt of by their predecessors. In addition, in order to encourage budding African composers to become interested in the establishment of the new music, several workshops should be set up in each African country. In these workshops, young musicians could be made familiar with African music from various parts of the continent and taught to use this music as the basis of their own original work. Exercises in creative writing should always be preceded by exercises in which the students are required to imitate existing styles of African music. To achieve this goal, performance workshops should be established in which the participants learn to play traditional music from different parts of Africa, and which could be used as laboratories for the development of new performance techniques. This kind of experience would make a strong foundation for producing the new breed of performing artist needed to interpret the new African music.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

For a form like African Pianism to thrive, cultural institutions may have to upgrade their interests to promote the style of their art music and place it on an equal footing with its rival styles, that is, the popular and the traditional. Competitions may be instituted not only in choral music, but

also in other spheres like composing for the piano and the orchestra and performances for boosting the standards in both African and Western instrumental music. Firms, corporations and individuals can complement the efforts of the National Commission on Culture to organize such competitions which will promote art music. The planning and the implementation of the music curriculum by the Ministry of Education must be aimed at lifting art music from its present state.

Music history, theory and compositional techniques are very important in promoting African Pianism. The study of music history may include the history of Ghanaian art music, while questions in theory and compositional techniques may involve styles associated with our Ghanaian or Nigerian composers, for instance, the solo and piano style of Nketia, or the orchestral or harmonic style of Gyimah Labi. More theoretical studies should be conducted on traditional music of Ghana on topics such as multipart organization among the Akan or Southern Ewe. Such work would aid future theorists and composers of art music of our country. Future composers may also have to make exhaustive use of the different scales that can be abstracted from Ghanaian traditional music, for example, in poly-modal or tonal devices. They could also borrow compositional techniques from Debussy and Schoenberg but use locally available scales. Music programmes should intensify and continue to ensure accuracy in rhythmic transcriptions. There is a wealth of rhythms hidden in our traditional dances which are yet to be tapped and used in future works.

The growth of a music is assured as long as the practitioners of that music continue to find new modes of expression for it. The vitality and potential of African Pianism, viewed in the light of dynamic changes which are currently taking place in African culture, indicate that we are on the threshold of a new and exciting period of African music. The message to composers is that everybody should contribute his quota towards refining, preserving and developing the African art musical style into a stronger and enviable tradition.

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